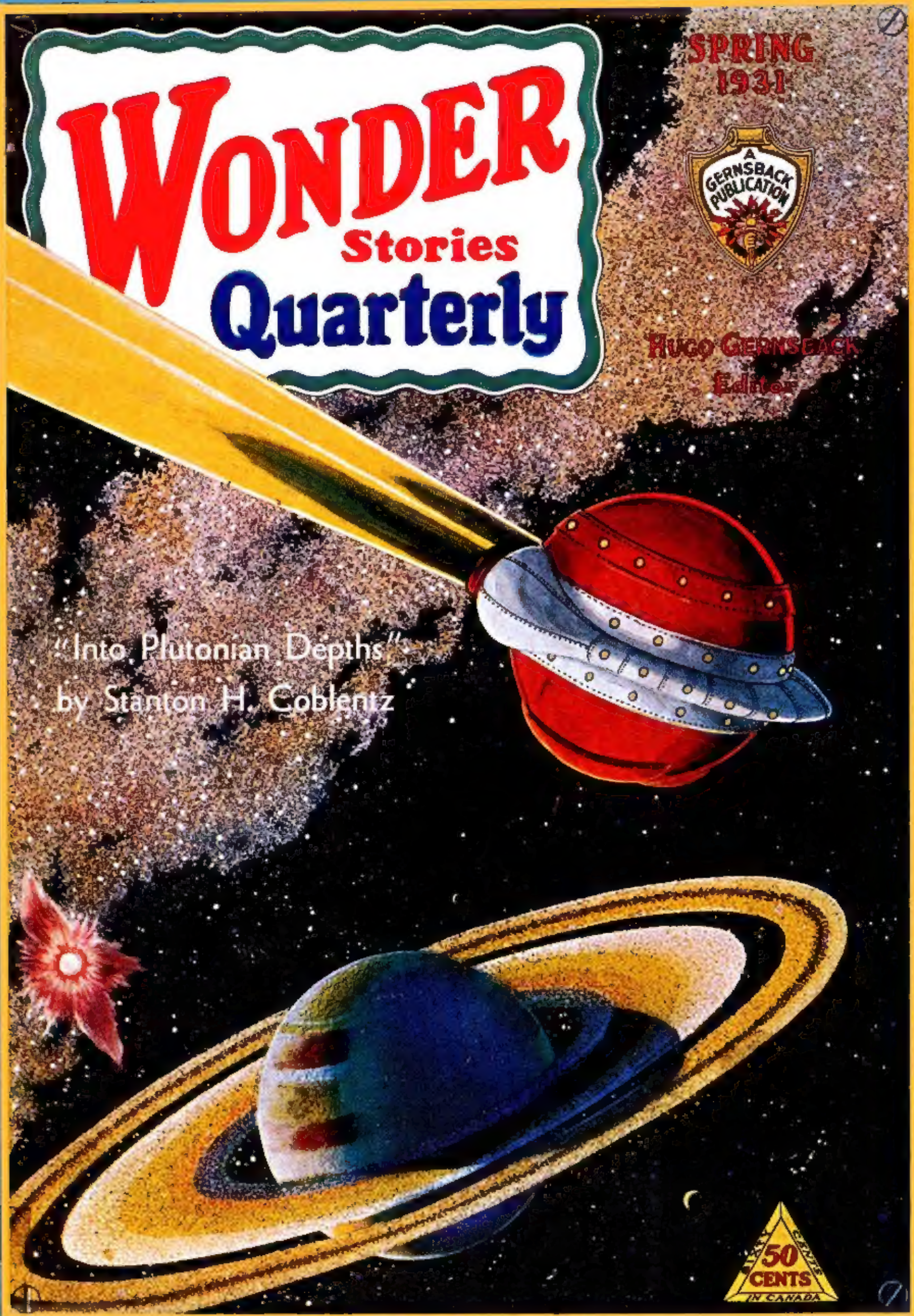
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No. 3

SPRING
1931

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OUR COVER ILLUSTRATION

from Stanton Coblentz' "Into Plutonian Depths" shows the space ship on its long journey to Pluto passing close to the beautiful ringed Saturn. In the background streams across the sky the Milky Way, while to the left, its grandeur reduced by distance, is the sun.

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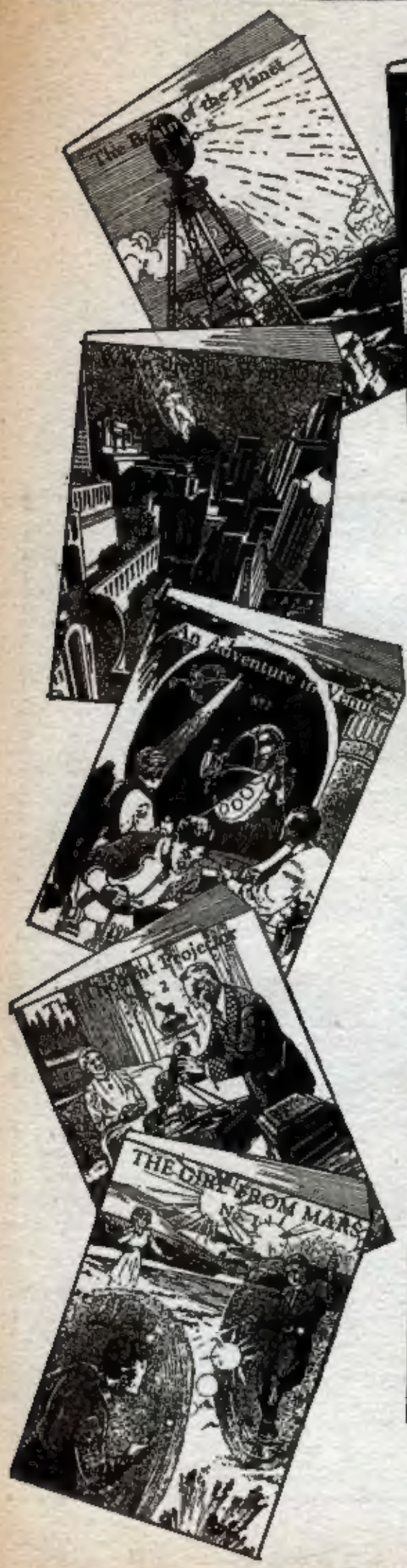

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We know that it's impossible for every reader to be an author, but we also know that many of our readers have excellent ideas for stories that never see the light of day. The contest which we propose is nothing more or less than to have our readers construct plots for interplanetary stories. You do not have to be an author to get up an idea for a good interplanetary story and we will show you below how you can do it rather easily.

From the plots we receive, we will select the best and submit these plots to authors whom we think best suited to develop the story. The author will write the story, using the plot submitted by our reader, and the story will be signed jointly by the author as well as the reader who supplied the plot. It is a novel idea and we believe you will like it. This, then, is a get-together for readers and authors and we are certain that some interesting results will come from this contest. The "plot" contest is meant only for our readers and no author who has previously had any story published is eligible for it. The author will receive his compensation for the writing of the story. In order that you can understand what we mean by plot, we give you an outline herewith, which is merely a sample to guide you.

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(*Continued on page* 430)

The Next Issue of WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY Will Be on Sale July 1, 1931

Into Plutonian Depths

By Stanton H. Coblentz

(*Illustration by Paul*)

My finger pressed the trigger. The strangers, one and all, whirled about and began racing away along the corridor.

AS far back as I can remember, I have been fascinated by the mystery of the heavens and by a desire to reach and explore the other planets. It was as a small boy that I first learned that the stars are far-off worlds; and it was as a small boy, with a small boy's sense of the adventurous, that I began to wonder how it would feel to go sailing across the skies and set foot on the shore of some other universe.

Here, to my mind, was a feat beside which the exploration of a tropical jungle or of a polar wilderness was like a mere back-yard expedition; and here, accordingly, was the focus of my life's attention.

Encouraged first by the tales of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells and other romancers, and later by a prolonged and serious scientific study, I slowly came to the conclusion that interplanetary travel was not so remote a possibility as men were inclined to imagine. All through my college days, during which I specialized in mathematics and physics, I was secretly speculating and planning as to the possible ways and means of voyaging to Venus, Mars or the moon; and after receiving my Doctor's degree, when I was fortunate enough to secure a position as Instructor in Astronomy, I took advantage of the well equipped library and observatory of Clayburn University to further my plans and investigations. For this reason, it is not surprising that, within three or four years, I began to come within sight of my goal.

STANTON H. COBLENTZ

THE discovery of the planet Pluto opens up to astronomers a new world for scientific investigation, and to science fiction authors a new outlet for their prophetic imaginations.

As yet we know little about the sun's distant child, and speculation as to its physical nature and conditions have arisen on all sides.

Certainly Pluto presents a romantic aspect to us as the lone outpost of the solar system. At its distance from the sun, that proud globe would have shrunk to a barely perceptible disc, and a day on Pluto would mean no more than eternal twilight. Its surface would be intensely cold, tho its interior might be warm enough to support life such as we know it. But we have said enough to indicate that in that lonely sentinel-planet we have the source of endless adventure and drama, and our well-known author makes the most of his opportunity to give us a story that is not only exciting to the highest degree and filled with strangeness and mystery, but also possessed of that keen biting humor of which he is a master.

From the beginning, however, I must be sure to allow the greater part of the credit to my boon companion and fellow worker, Andrew Lyman Stark. Despite all my years of study and research, of computation and experimentation, neither the conception nor the execution of the scheme would have been possible had it not been for Stark.

From childhood he had been my friend; we had grown up together in the same little country town; he had shared my boyhood enthusiasms and delights; my dreams had been his dreams, and his dreams had been mine; he had been quick to take fire at every imaginative idea, and I can well remember how, at the ripe age of twelve, the two of us would sit together of a summer's evening on some broken fence beside a cornfield and gravely plan the heroic deeds to be performed after our flight to some neighboring world.

I must confess that, in this respect, I was the initiator and Stark the follower, and that all his early astronomical ideas were derived (doubtless in grossly distorted form) from my own studious lips; while from my superior eminence of seven months, I would set forth with professorial assurance the plans and opinions which he, my junior, had no choice but to accept.

The strange part of it all is that our relationship did not weaken and vanish with the years. Instead, the passage of time only brought closer understanding. During our High School days, we were always partners in tennis and baseball no less than in our studies; at college we were nicknamed "Damon and Pythias" by our jesting companions, and not only did we share the same room but we attended the same classes, read the same books, thought the same thoughts and burnt with the same desires. Hence, when the time came for that experiment which was to mark the peak and dread climax of our lives, it was but fitting that Stark should be a sharer in all that I suffered, dared and achieved.

His picture frames itself now before my imagination as vividly as his actual presence presented itself to me on that day when we exulted together at our first triumph. I see his round, sun-tanned face, dominated by two blue eyes that seemed to bubble from inexhaustible wells of laughter; I see a broad forehead surmounted

by a shock of wavy light hair that never was and never could be in order; I see the thin lips which habitually took a humorous or satiric slant and yet did not belie the serious expression that dominated the face; I see the carelessly adjusted garments, always overlarge, always flung about the tall frame as loosely as old sacks; and yet, with it all, I see one of the most lovable figures it shall ever be given me to set eyes upon in this life. . .

But let not friendship lead me into panegyric. I must return to the sober facts of my narrative, and report how it was that Stark and I came to make our great and terrible achievement. Even after our college days, our lives did not follow separate channels; it was as if we had a twin destiny, for no sooner did I become Instructor in Astronomy than Stark applied for and received an appointment as Instructor in Physics in the same University! And so once more we took rooms together, and were collaborators in our plans and experiments no less than in the common details of our lives.

SEVERAL years now went by without bearing visible fruit; nor must I deny that a period of depression and discouragement preceded the eventual discovery. By the time of our graduation, Stark and I had agreed that the possibility of ever being able to leave the earth and travel to another planet depended upon one factor, and one alone—the force of gravity. Gravity at the earth's surface, it will be recalled, is so powerful that a projectile, unless propelled by some continuous source of energy, would have to attain a speed of almost seven miles a second in order to be released into outer space.

It was not inconceivable, we thought, that an explosive should yet be produced to give such a speed to a projectile; but what did seem inconceivable was that any container launched at such a velocity should carry living men away from the earth. To begin with, the shock of the departure would bring instant death even to creatures much more hardily organized than human beings; in the next place, the resistance of the atmosphere, if it did not destroy the projectile entirely, would raise the metallic walls to such a glaring temperature that the occupants would perish in a tomb of fire.

It might be urged, of course, that it would be possible to accelerate the car gradually so as to avoid fatal effects; but, unfortunately, we could devise no way of producing such an acceleration. No! it was all very well for adventurers in a Jules Verne romance to go circling about the moon; but, in actual life, it seemed that they would have to be built of iron instead of flesh and blood.

Does that mean that Stark and I despaired of achieving our goal? By no means! it was only that we did not minimize the difficulties of our task. Since an initial speed of seven miles a second, even if attainable, would be immediately fatal, we must leave this planet at a much slower rate; in other words, we much either reach the required velocity by gradual degrees, or else must rise in defiance of gravity. And it was the latter method that seemed to us the more promising.

I must here give Stark credit for a brilliant theory, although one in which he was not alone; for something like it was announced a little later by no less an authority than Einstein.

"I do not look upon gravitation as an isolated and unparalleled force," I remember my friend remarking one evening, as he lounged across from me among the pillows of a disordered divan. "Rather, I believe it will be found some day to be linked to magnetism and electricity. Gravitation, magnetism, and electricity—think carefully about those three, Dan, for—who knows? —they may hold the secret of the universe.

"Personally, I have a notion that gravity is not an absolute and unalterable force, which operates in all circumstances, and always operates in the same manner, according to the laws of Newton. No other such force is known in nature; heat, light, electricity, kinetic energy, are all subject to change and regulation according to the principles which we create for them; even radio-activity is to be found only under rare and restricted circumstances; while magnetism is limited in its operation to particular metals.

"Why, therefore, should gravity alone not be susceptible of control? Why should there not be conditions under which its power could be reduced? Why should there not be substances over which it has little or no influence? True, no such substances have ever been discovered; but that thought should not deter us, for is it not the place of science to find the undiscovered? —yes, even to find a thing so strange as a gravity insulator?"

"Gravity insulator?" I repeated, sitting up in my armchair with excited interest, and allowing the latest issue of a scientific journal to drop unnoticed to the floor. "Gravity insulator, did you say?"

"Yes, gravity insulator," he affirmed. "After all, is there anything really surprising in the idea? Is it not founded on familiar principles? You are pretty well acquainted with electric insulators, are you not? Does it never strike you as odd that a lineman, equipped with rubber gloves, may safely handle a wire charged with current enough to electrocute him?

"We can only theorize why it is that electricity will dart through one solid substance practically without resistance, while another substance, no more solid to our eyes, will oppose it like a wall of adamant. But we do know that such things happen—and we continually take advantage of the fact. And so why not take advantage of similar facts with regard to gravity? If gravity is related to electricity in essence, we should be able to build an insulator against both alike."

"Heavens, Andrew," I exclaimed, leaping to my feet in sudden jubilation, "once we have a gravity insulator, the highway to the stars will be open! There will no longer be anything to keep us on earth!"

"Exactly! There will no longer be anything to keep us on earth." repeated Stark, as he also leaped to his feet, and, seizing my hands, shook them as heartily as though our goal were already reached.

A moment later, seated side by side on the couch, while his great eyes sparkled with a contagious joy, we plunged into an eager discussion of ways and means of finding the gravity annihilator.

I have often wondered whether, had we foreseen the weirdness and terror and heartache and agony of the exploits that were to spring from our discussion, we would have planned and debated with such beaming eyes and enthusiastic gestures; or whether, with grimaces of repugnance and horror, we would not have decided to confine ourselves henceforward to the sober and unadventurous duties of college instructors.

CHAPTER II.

The Discovery

NOW that I look back upon our years of blundering experimentation, it seems extraordinary to me that we should ever have found a gravity insulator. Even though theoretically we were on the right track, in practice our difficulty was a little like that of him who would retrieve a lost pearl from a wilderness of brambles. Somewhere in the universe, we were convinced, there existed a substance—possibly many substances—through which gravity could not operate; yet neither Stark nor I had more than the vaguest idea where to find that substance.

That it was rare was unquestionable; that it was beyond our reach was not impossible. Our only clue in the beginning was to follow the analogy of electricity: if gravity and electricity were related, then possibly some material which was an exceedingly poor conductor of the one would prove also immune to the other. And so, for more than two years, we experimented, testing every substance of high electrical resistance, and even originating numbers of new chemical compounds; but, for all the progress we made, we might have sat twiddling our fingers.

We would have been less than human had we not been discouraged; and I am not ashamed to confess that there were moments when we debated abandoning the whole weary quest. Yet in us both there was some dogged quality that did not permit us to give up easily; and so, even when hope had all but left us, we persisted, and daily performed new computations, and stained our hands with new chemicals, and formulated new plans of attack. But doubtless we would ultimately have surrendered—had not the goddess of chance, or what we like to call chance, smiled upon us unexpectedly. . .

I remember that one morning Stark was experimenting with a new asbestos compound, and had expressed his intention of subjecting it to the influence of the X-ray in the hope of getting what he called a "degravitating effect." Why he hoped to get such an effect; or why he employed the X-ray at all, or employed it upon this particular substance, I have never been able to determine; nor has he himself ever given any explanation, other than that he was struck by a "happy intuition."

For my own part, I know that, when he announced his plans, I merely shrugged indifferently, convinced that he was but turning up another blind alley. What, therefore, was my surprise when, two or three hours later, I peeped in at the door of our little laboratory, and found Stark bent over a table and a pair of scales with trance-like absorption!

It was some time before he became aware of my presence; and as I stood at the door silently watching, and observed how intently his eyes were concentrated upon the objects of his research, and how his fingers trembled and his whole frame quivered with excitement, I too began to grow excited, as though I already realized that something portentous was in store. . .

"Andrew!" I at length murmured, no longer able to endure the suspense.

He started toward me like a man who has been struck; or, rather, like one sharply awakened out of a dream. "Dan! Why, I—I didn't know you were here!" he muttered apologetically. "You—you gave me such a shock!"

Then, after a moment of silence, his eyes were animated by a flashing light; his whole face was swept by a wave of exultant joy. "You're just in time, Dan!" he exclaimed, seizing my hand and almost dragging me into the laboratory. "I was just going to call you! There's something to show you here! Come, and see!"

Reaching toward the table, he thrust into my hand an iron bar weighing three or four pounds. "Just feel this!" he ejaculated.

I did as commanded, and remarked that the iron bar seemed a most ordinary one.

"Now lift the rod over here!" he ordered, pointing to the table, on which lay a grayish-green sheet of the asbestos compound.

Wonderingly, I obeyed directions, and lo! what magic was this! what an eerie sensation overcame me! I shuddered, and trembled in every limb; a chill crept down my spine; I had the feeling of one who has seen a ghost. For, all at once, it was as if half the iron rod had been drawn from my hands; I was conscious of only half its former weight!

"You see!" cried Stark, pacing rapidly back and forth, fairly beside himself with delight. "You see! It works! It works! At last we have our gravity insulator!"

And forthwith he began expounding the principles of the new invention.

I shall not weary the reader with a detailed account of the experiments of the next two or three months. That chance discovery of Stark's—that the action of the X-ray would partly degravitize the asbestos compound—provided us with a working basis that made the consummation of our goal only a matter of weeks.

It seemed highly unlikely to us that Stark, at that first lucky stroke had hit upon the ideal degravitizing compound; and further experiments showed us, indeed, that by varying the proportions, by introducing new ingredients, and by prolonging the action of the X-ray, it was possible to increase the resistance to gravity and to make any tested substance lose not merely one half, but two thirds, three quarters, or even nine tenths of its original weight! This, of course, was encouraging, but it was not sufficient; for

so long as gravity acts at all, it would be difficult to surmount it. . .

However, we already had the necessary key; it was now only a question of refining our gravity insulator, of removing those impurities through which the earth's attraction still operated. And this task was only one of patient plodding and testing, of trying the compound successively without each of the original elements, and of rejecting those which seemed favorable to gravity. Thus, in the end, we were certain to have an insulator which, weightless itself, would render any object above it immune to the earth's attraction.

And so at last there came a day when, placing our hands above the screen of *contragrav*,—as we had termed our invention—we were conscious of no weight whatever. It was as if our flesh and blood did not exist; we could hold our hands high in air as easily as we could rest them on the table; while any small object—whether a feather or a piece of lead—might remain uncannily floating above the *contragrav*, as though in defiance of the laws of Newton!

Not wishing to leave any avenue of doubt untested, Stark and I now constructed an experimental suit of clothes, which we surrounded completely with *contragrav*. Though bulky and ponderous-looking as a medieval coat of mail, it could be lifted as easily as a bit of cheese cloth; while Stark, who was the first to wear it, performed antics that would have made any professional stage "wizard" green with envy.

I recall that the suit, which was much too large even for my friend's well developed frame, gave him the appearance of some monster out of a dragon book. To observe the huge, gray-green breastpiece and helmet, the immense shoulder-caps, the massive knee-pieces and monstrous *contragrav* boots, one would have thought Stark crushed beneath the weight of his own apparel.

Hence it was all the more remarkable to observe the effortless lightness with which he walked. Literally, he was stepping upon air! Each time his foot swung forth, it glided upward gracefully to a height of more than a yard, and then, with graceful slowness, descended, so that his movements resembled those of a prancing horse, except that they were infinitely less swift.

But a still more extraordinary performance was to follow. Taking a sudden leap, he drifted lightly toward the ceiling, which he reached with a slow, easy motion. And then, waving his arms before him as though swimming in the atmosphere, he began agilely moving midway between the ceiling and the floor, traversing the room from end to end with legs dangling uselessly beneath him.

Even though I had anticipated something of this nature, the actual sight was enough to take my breath away. I stood speechless, while Stark descended and slipped off the suit of *contragrav*—and then what excitement and what a hearty shaking of hands there was!

"It's done! Done! Done!" I cried. "Our invention is a success! A marvelous success! We can fly to the stars at last!"

"We can fly to the stars!" he echoed; and, with my hands clasped in his, he began to do a wild dance about the room, while scarcely noticing how many books or scientific implements he upset . . . .

It was sheer exhaustion that bade him halt at last, and, panting and happy, fling himself into a chair across from me. How flushed was his face! How dishevelled his long, wild hair! How brilliant the light in his scintillant blue eyes! With his tie but half adjusted, with two buttons torn from his shirt, with his sleeves frayed at the edge and his whole suit in a state of ruffled disorder, one might have thought him a vagabond or a madman. And yet, sitting across from him and sharing the passion and jubilation of that moment, I knew that it was the flame of genius that shone from his glowing face.

"There's no reason for delay now!" his rattling words came forth, when at length he had recovered his breath. "We will complete our plans at once! We will make our computations! We will build a car of *contragrav!* Within six months, Dan, if all goes well—within six months, you and I will set sail for some other planet!"

"Yes, within six months!" I repeated, enthusiastically. "Within six months, Andrew!"

Why was it that, despite the exultation with which these words were spoken, a momentary shudder came across me? Why was it that, now that the goal of my life was about to be attained, I trembled, and felt vaguely uneasy? Why did the phrase "some other planet" not have the same enchanted ring as of old? Why was it that, a term of six months having been definitely set, I experienced a frightened revulsion, an unreasoning repugnance, almost a flash of terror?

Yet I knew that I was committed to the adventure, and that nothing short of sudden paralysis or death would bar me from the highway to the stars.

CHAPTER III

Plans and Preparations

WHEN Stark predicted that our great adventure would have begun within six months, he was letting his enthusiasm run away with his sense of scientific possibility. Evidently he had not taken time to consider all the obstacles still in our path, all the computations to be made, all the indispensable preparations and precautions. Not six months but a year was the minimum of time that we found necessary; in fact, the interval lengthened into something considerably over a year, while our days were passed in nervous expectation, delirious planning, and slow plodding labor.

How much there was to attend to! First, taking advantage of a not inconsiderable fortune which I had recently inherited, we contracted with a leading iron works to construct a spherical car of reinforced and tempered steel—a car about seventy feet in diameter and fitted out according to specifications that must have struck the makers as curious indeed.

The metallic envelope was to be encased in a thick layer of *contragrav;* and this substance was to be provided in one hundred closely fitting al-

though separable segments, all of which were to be under control by means of springs and wires, so that the occupant of the car could cause any of them to fold out of place or to return to place merely by pulling the proper switch.

This, as will presently be seen, was of high importance, for our chief motive power during the flight was to be the gravitational pull of the planets and the sun, which could be regulated by exposing any particular part of the car to the attraction of any desired heavenly body, or else by withholding such an attraction at will.

Second in importance to the screen of *contragrav* I rank two powerful gasoline engines (likewise enclosed in *contragrav*), which were to send us skyward at an initial velocity of several hundred miles an hour. Beyond the limits of the earth's atmosphere, they would of course be useless until we struck the atmosphere of some neighboring planet; while the huge propeller blades, whose weight would provide no practical encumbrance so long as they were in operation, would have offered a serious obstacle in outer space had not Stark invented a little device compelling them to withdraw automatically behind layers of *contragrav* as soon as we reached the upper atmosphere. As for the engines themselves, they could be controlled from within the car, much as an automobile motor can be controlled from the driver's seat. To aid our propulsion in space, rocket motors using the new and powerful *Hygene* fuel were utilized—thus permitting us to use at any moment the most efficient agent.

I shall not list the provisions and scientific instruments which we held necessary for our flight: the case upon case of concentrated food, the barrels of distilled water, the oxygen generators, the space estimators, the thermometers, barometers, telescopes, and other paraphernalia; the medical apparatus and surgical implements, the electric storage batteries for producing light and heat, the radio apparatus to signal the earth, the gas-masks to provide us temporarily with oxygen in case that essential were lacking at our destination, the library of pocket-sized books for filling the many, many idle hours en route . . . .

Let me pass over all this, to turn to the thing upon which all this largely depended. For, before we could determine the details of our outfit, we had to decide upon our goal. And this, for a long time, provided a bone of contention.

My original suggestion was that we make a modest beginning, and travel to the moon. Being less than a quarter of a million miles away, our satellite would provide the most convenient destination; a few days at most, and we would be there! and the prospects of returning would be far better than if we had sought the wilds of the outer universe. But Stark would have nothing of this idea.

"What? Only go to the moon?" he cried, his big eyes darting indignation, as thought I had suggested something humiliating. "Why, that would be only like a trip to the suburbs! Once we've set out, we might as well make a real voyage of it! Sirius! Arcturus! the Nebula in Andromeda!"

"Come, come, Andrew, you know you're raving!" I shouted; and, indeed, a faint mischievous twinkle in his eyes showed that he was not wholly in earnest. "You realize as well as I do that the nearest fixed star, Alpha Centauri, is more than three light years away. Traveling at the rate of one hundred and eighty miles a second—which, you will admit, is fast enough for our purposes—it would take us more than three thousand years to arrive!"

Stark gave a dry chuckle, and mopped his long hair thoughtfully. "Well, I suppose I would get a little impatient, waiting that long!" he muttered. "Guess, after all, we'd better try Venus, Mercury, or Mars. Or how about Uranus, Neptune, or the satellites of Jupiter? Any of those should offer interesting possibilities."

"Well, then, how about settling upon Mars, which is at least occasionally within reaching distance?"

Stark grunted, and Mars would undoubtedly have been our destination—had it not been for a circumstance beyond our control.

THE reader will recall how, in the spring of 1930, the scientific world was shaken by the announcement of the discovery of a trans-Neptunian planet, to which the name of Pluto was given. It was our misfortune that this announcement came at the very time when we were preparing for our flight; at a time, indeed, when our destination had been only tentatively chosen. And the effect upon Stark was overwhelming.

Something in the very name of Pluto; something in the thought of this forlorn ninth member of the Solar System took an irresistible hold upon his imagination, and for days he seemed able to talk about little else.

"Think of this strange, strange world!" he would exclaim, while slowly he would pace up and down the room and stroke his chin as though weighing some momentous problem.

"Think of it a billion miles or so beyond Neptune, a globe perhaps no larger than the earth, lost in the blackness of the outer void, its years longer than our centuries, its seasons longer than our lives! What stories it would be able to tell! Are there any living creatures there? Were any living beings ever able to endure the terror of its sunless, frozen plains? Would we find the imprint of lost races upon its shores?—races that flourished while the planet was heated from within, but that have long ago fallen in the struggle with the cold?

"Just consider, Dan!—consider the scientific value of exploring such a world. May not its geological strata hold the secret of evolution?—yes, the secret of the evolution of the universe? May we not, after journeying there, be able to propound a new nebular hypothesis? May we not even have won the key to the Ultimate?"

It seemed to me that Stark, in bursting into such rhapsodies, was guilty of the wildest, the most irrational extravagance. None the less, how could I listen to him and remain unaffected? Gradually, in spite of myself—in spite of the protests of my own reason—I was coming to hear him with a gathering interest, with a heightened pleasure; gradually I to began to draw pictures of the joy of descending upon that remote, shrivelled, sun-forsaken world. And by degrees,

without exactly realizing it myself, I was capitulating, capitulating not so much before Stark's arguments as before his emotional fervor . . . .

Nevertheless, the final concession was not made until after a long debate. Stemming the tides of our reckless enthusiasm, I had performed some sober calculations; and the results were not of a nature to make me shout with joy. On the basis of the probable distance of Pluto (its exact distance was not known at the time), it would take us nearly a year to arrive even if we were to travel at an average speed of one hundred and fifty miles a second!

One hundred and fifty miles a second!—few of the heavenly bodies were known to attain such a velocity! And one year of travel!—one year locked in a tiny flying cage!—even my lifelong longing for interplanetary travel wavered before such an appalling prospect.

And yet my intended fellow voyager, when I put the problem before him, seemed not at all disturbed. "Yes, I have considered all that," he declared. "Have you entered into any precise computations as to the possibilities of our *contragrav* car? Well, I have. You realize that speeds of three hundred miles a second or over have been attributed to certain of the stars and nebulae; but the reason that twenty or thirty miles is seldom exceeded in the Solar System is that gravity acts by checks and balances; the pull of one planet counteracts that of another; the moon is drawn, for example, by the sun as well as by the earth; while no matter what the gravitational force in one direction, there are certain to be strong gravitational forces in the opposite direction. Now, in our *contragrav* car, all that will be changed. We will be subject to gravitational influence in the direction we choose, and in that direction only; there will be no checks and balances; accordingly, we may attain a speed vastly greater than anything reached by the flying comets and meteorites of the Solar System. With our ability to manipulate the forces of Solar gravitation as we will, and with our rockets working judiciously, we can attain previously impossible speeds.

"But, on the other hand, the stars to our rear will be as if they did not exist. And thus, Dan, we may travel as rapidly as three hundred miles a second, and reach Pluto in a little more than seven months. It will be possible, as you know, to exist in our car for that length of time."

"Even so," I objected, "I cannot see how that solves the problem. Traveling at three hundred miles a second, how would we be able to halt our flight? Would we not go flaming like a meteorite to the shores of our fellow world?"

Stark stared at me as if wondering whether I could be serious.

"Have you forgotten," he demanded, "our arrangements for the use of *contragrav*? Suppose for the sake of argument, that we are within three hundred million miles of Pluto, which we are approaching at several hundred miles a second? All we will have to do then will be to close the *contragrav* windows on the side of Pluto, which will cut off the attraction of that planet; and to open the *contragrav* windows on the side of the sun, which will let in the sun's attraction and reverse our ship to have our rockets retarding our flight."

"True, all that will be possible," I acknowledged, remembering our previous plans and discussions. "Possible, that is, if we don't wait too long about opening the windows facing toward the sun."

Stark grunted, and the debate came to a close. But both of us knew that he had triumphed, and that, when at length the time came to say farewell to the earth, we would direct our course toward the dim, far-lying Pluto.

CHAPTER IV

"The Wanderer of the Skies"

As the date of our prospective flight approached, I was conscious of a growing uneasiness. It was not that I wavered in my intentions, or thought of withdrawing; it was only that I realized as never before the appalling nature of our undertaking, the hazards of thrusting ourselves out into the unknown void, the probability that we should never again have sight of this green, familiar earth.

Plan and calculate as we might, guide ourselves by the most exact computations, secure the most delicately balanced instruments that science could devise—and there was still the chance that something unforeseen would intervene, that there would be some vital factor we had overlooked, that we would cry out when too late, "If only we had done this! If only we had done that! If only—if only . . . ."

Even though we tried our best to shut out such dreary reflections, and made our preparations in as composed a manner as we could, both Stark and I acted like men under sentence of death. We made our wills; we put our affairs in order; we secured indefinite leaves of absence from the University; we left instructions that if, five years from the date of our departure, we had not been seen or heard of, our property was to be devoted to certain institutions for the advancement of science.

Luckily, neither of us had any close relatives dependent upon us; we were both unmarried, our parents were dead, our brothers and sisters well able to fend for themselves—therefore it seemed to us that our lives were our own to risk. True, at times I noticed a dimming of Stark's eyes as I mentioned a certain lively, black-haired girl with whom I had often see him in conversation; but, if he was unable to keep a pained expression from his face, he would at least grit his teeth with grim-featured resolution.

It was with mixed emotions that I occasionally visited the iron works which was building our interplanetary car. As I watched the progress of the seventy-foot sphere that was to be our home for many long perilous months; as I saw the metallic ribs being welded into place, observed the storage compartments and the living compartment in the process of construction, and witnessed the adjustment of the various scientific appliances, I was filled with exultation no less than with foreboding.

It seemed to me that our car was being pro-

vided with every convenience and safeguard that science could offer; and though I shuddered as I contrasted the infinitesimal size of our vehicle with the cyclopean distances it must traverse, I imagined how it was to be the first of a fleet of interplanetary fliers, the pioneer of innumerable other-worldly expeditions; how cars of ten, fifty, or a hundred times its size were to be constructed for regular passenger service to Venus, Jupiter or Mars; how, outlandishly crude in comparison with the monster carriers that were to follow, it would some day be preserved in a museum for the edification of the curious, as the earliest railroad trains are preserved today . . . .

But in other moments when more gloomy thoughts overwhelmed me, I would see it drifting as a derelict through immensity, or crashing in fire on some rocky Plutonian peak. Then our friends on earth, knowing nothing of the end, would uneasily wait and wait, while unspoken questions would tremble on their lips, and dread anticipation would gradually give place to dread realization, and mute memorials would be raised in our honor—until at last, with the lengthening of time, all interest would be blotted out, all comment would die away, and it would scarcely be remembered that once two scatter-brained adventurers had vanished in an effort to penetrate the mysteries of space . . . . Which of my visions was to be nearer the truth?

Months in advance, the date of our departure had been set for the first of May; while the place of departure was to be a little field about five miles from the iron works—a field to which our car, despite its size, could be removed without difficulty because of its weightless condition. As for the date, it had been chosen after careful computations, for on the first of May, we found, the position of the heavenly bodies would be such as to permit us to set out for Pluto with a minimum of difficulty.

Our particular point of departure, of course, was a matter of little moment; but the field of our choice had the advantage of being several miles from town, and hence of being unlikely to attract a crowd.

When at length the fateful day arrived, Stark and I arose early after an almost sleepless night. We bathed and dressed in silence; we tossed down a cup or two of coffee that seemed strangely tasteless to our lips; then, leaving our toast and eggs untouched, we sent for our mail, which was featured by several warning letters from friends and acquaintances, who urged us in the name of the God of Reason to abandon the foolhardy undertaking while there still was time.

One letter, I remember, brought a peculiar grimace into Stark's face and made him dab at his eyes savagely; while the small handsome writing, of which I happened to get just a glimpse, brought me reminders of a certain animated, black-haired lady . . . .

WITH the letter clutched in his hand, Stark strode over to the window, and stood looking out at the budding groves yellowish green in the morning light, and whitened here and there with the first blossoms of the dogwood. The sun was beaming vividly from a clear blue sky; the scent of blooming meadows was borne to our nostrils; our ears were enchanted by the chirping and carolling of happy birds. "It's a wonderful world, Dan," declared Stark, gloomily, after a long silence. "A wonderful beautiful world. I have never noticed before quite how lovely every tint and shade can be. The air seems so fragrant! The bird-song seems so sweet! Do you think we will ever, ever see the earth again, Dan?"

And he heaved a long, long sigh, like that of a man over whose head hovers a sentence of doom.

"Surely, surely, we will see it again!" I asserted; but I too sighed, and felt by no means certain.

And I too, gazing out at the flowering woods and the clear skies and the low, distant blue ridge of a mountain, felt that this was a glorious, an enchanting world; and, for the first time, it occurred to me to ask why any one should seek for a fairer, more interesting planet.

Probably I would have been plunged into a profound melancholy, had there not been so much to be done—and had not the first of our callers already begun to arrive. While we were busily at work over our baggage, our visitors came in an almost incessant stream. Most of them merely shook our hands, wished us good luck, and departed; but we could see how dolefully some of them drew up their lips, nodding as if to say, "Poor fellows! this is the last we shall ever see of them!"; and we heard how others, less restrained in their emotions, openly pleaded, "Well, Stark, have you finally made up your mind? . . . . Well, Endicott, there's still time to reconsider! Better late than never, you know!"

The morning was almost done when my friend and I stepped into the automobile summoned by one of our colleagues. As the car sped across the fresh green fields and around the bends of blossoming hills, we thought how soon we were to make a vastly swifter flight through regions vastly stranger; and, at that reflection, a great sadness overcame us.

It was a simple sight, an everyday sight, but a sight new seen with new eyes, that stabbed me with the sharpest and most lasting regret: a young man and a young woman strolling arm in arm down a flowered lane while we flashed by at racing speed. My fleeting glimpse of this pair made me realize all at once how much I was throwing away in order to go groping through the void; how probably no woman's arms would ever be entwined in mine, and no voices of children and home, no comradeship in love and labor come to bless me through the long reaches of time. But I would go forth into the darkness, and even if I returned it would be after years, a man perhaps wrecked by hardship and suffering . . . .

Cursed by such thoughts, I at length caught my first glimpse of our destination. A spherical grayish green projection far in the distance informed me that the *contragrav* car was in readiness; and, as we drew near, I saw that an enormous crowd had gathered (no doubt attracted by recent newspaper articles); while motor cars

were parked for half a mile on both sides of the road.

So dense was the mob that all that we saw was a great black mass, reminding us of the swarms at a football game, and making it difficult for us to approach. When finally the throng was aware of our presence, however, tumultuous cheers burst forth; we were surrounded enthusiastically, lifted bodily from our seats in the automobile, and borne on the shoulders of the crowd toward the awaiting interplanetary vehicle.

We could see how its gigantic frame was swaying and billowing in the breeze, tied by ropes like a balloon; we could see its name streaming from a pennant flung to the breeze, the *Wanderer of the Skies;* we could see the small windows, looking little larger than human eyes, which here and there served as spy-holes in the otherwise unbroken *contragrav* envelope; we could see the two huge gasoline engines which lay at the base of the sphere in readiness to supply the initial motive power. But this was all that we could see; the mob was so demonstrative that we could do little more than to return their greetings and to creep as speedily as possible through the little door at the base of the *Wanderer of the Skies* and close it upon the multitude.

THE time of departure had been set for about three in the afternoon, but in the interval there was much to be done: we had to make our final tests of the apparatus, to determine that the air-tight compartments were all securely closed, to examine the oxygen tubes and the water tanks, and to ascertain that the straps fastening each cask and article of furniture to the floor were all properly in place. It was with a dizzy sensation, a feeling of being but half present, that I went through all these tasks; but finally they were all completed, and my watch showed that it still lacked twenty minutes of the eventful hour.

Then it was that Stark and I returned to the door of our car, flung it open, and took our last thirsty glimpse of the world we were so soon to leave. The throng pressed about us with cheers and cries; Stark lifted wide his arms, and strove to speak, but I was conscious only of a confused shouting; while at the same time I saw a little trickling from one of his eyes, and felt my own eyes suddenly dimmed . . . .

When next I grew aware of my surroundings, I observed a familiar black-eyed girlish figure standing across from Stark; I heard a sob, and knew that the figure had withdrawn among the many; then excited arms were swung about my shoulders, and I felt pressed, pushed, pounded, shoved back through the door of the car, which closed upon me with a sudden sickening thud . .

"Time!" I heard Stark mutter, as, watch in hand, he stood before me, pale but composed.

So saying, he pressed a little button labelled "Engines," and almost instantly the whirring and thudding of motors came to our ears, and the car began to quiver and vibrate like a living thing. Another second, and Stark had pulled a lever which, I knew, released the ropes holding us to the earth; then slowly, gradually, and so easily that at first I did not realize that we were in motion, we began to rise.

For a moment we slipped open one of the *contragrav* windows to its full width of six inches, giving us a clear view of the throng below. The thousands of spectators were writhing, and stamping about tumultuously, waving their arms and pointing to us in wide-mouthed agitation. But the sound of their clamoring no longer came to our ears, and after a minute they began to grow far-away, strange, like pygmy creatures. Then, unable to endure the sight of their rapid dwindling, we slammed the window and went about the business of celestial navigation. At last we had severed connection with the earth!

CHAPTER V

A Sudden Danger

HAD any of our friends been able to peer through the walls of our car some time after our departure, they would have gasped in unbelieving astonishment. They would have seen men who seemed equipped with occult or magical powers, men able to walk in air as easily as on the earth, men who glided from end to end of a long compartment without once touching the floor! They would have gazed at human beings for whom gravity had ceased to operate, and whose bodies had come to be of a feathery lightness!—no, more than of a feathery lightness! of the impalpable fineness ascribed to disembodied spirits!

Speaking as one of the only two persons who underwent the experience, I may say that no conceivable sensation is more eerie or more frightening; it was as if my physical bulk had ceased to be, so that I had become a wraith, a shade, a mere vapor. Not for hours could I overcome the sense of having been "emptied out", of being only half present, or less than half present; yet when gradually I began to accustom myself to my new environment, I was conscious of an unimaginable freedom, a buoyancy and effortless ease of movement that was delicious as it was novel. Soon I began to wonder how other men were able to endure their slow and plodding frames, weighted by the constant tugging of gravity.

It was not, of course, that we in our car were entirely free from gravity. The attraction of the earth had indeed been cut off by the *contragrav* envelope; but we relied upon other gravitational forces to draw us upon our way. The time of departure had been nicely calculated so that the moon would be almost directly overhead; and it was upon the lunar power that we relied to accelerate our speed during the first hours of the flight, in addition to the use of our rockets.

Then, when we were so near our satellite that we would have crashed upon its surface had we continued, we closed the windows looking out upon the moon, and opened the windows in the direction of Mars, by whose attraction we were to be ruled for many days. The whole process involved computations that had engaged Stark and myself for weeks; but, thanks to those computations, we knew to the fraction of a second

how much margin of safety we had, and how long to continue in each particular direction.

Let me now picture the interior of the *Wanderer of the Skies*. Every cubic inch of space within its seventy-foot frame had been utilized: there was, first of all the main living compartment, which ran from end to end of the car in its central zone, and which, with its ten-foot ceiling, its couches, its dining table, its small case of books, its scientific implements, its gymnastic appliances, was as varied in content as a museum and yet as commodious as any world-to-world travelers could expect.

Beneath this room, and above it—"beneath" and "above", of course, were now only relative terms—were the storage rooms and the "oxygen laboratory"; the first laden with casks of water and with case upon case of provisions, the second filled with appliances for keeping the oxygen supply normal through the electrical decomposition of various oxides and of water. In addition, there were compartments containing other contrivances, which I need not describe in detail: enormous airtight containers for waste products, which we had no safe way of emptying outside; cylinders of gasoline for driving our motors when we struck the atmosphere of Pluto; scores upon scores of electric storage batteries, as well as quantities of spare wiring and incandescent globes; charts and maps of the heavens, notebooks, pencils and ink, electric stoves for cooking and heating, fur coats and other Arctic apparel . . . . All in all, it seemed to me that there was nothing which we had overlooked, and that the thoroughness of our preparations augured the success of our expedition.

Propelled by the gasoline motors to the upper levels of the atmosphere, while above us the air retreated in a whirlwind, we were only a few minutes in attaining a velocity of three hundred and eighty miles an hour. Up, up, up we soared, at an ever-increasing rate, drawn by the attraction of the moon; while from time to time, glancing through one of the tiny slits or windows which we drew open by the pressure of a little lever, we could see the earth outflung far beneath us, its hills and fields gleaming in patches of green and blue and brown, its lakes and oceans shining in silvery, burnished sheets, its eastern expanses featureless and black beneath the sovereignty of night.

It was only an hour or two before the whole great globe stood revealed, a huge mass rolling amid the blaze of sunlight, with polar caps frosty and magnificent, with seas and continents streaked and banded with snowy cloud . . . . Was it here, on this fast-receding ball, this fantastic-looking lump in the heavens, that we had made our home, and that humanity suffered and fought, and toiled and dreamed and aspired?

SWIFTER and swifter we soared; four hundred, five hundred, six hundred, seven hundred miles an hour was registered by the speed gauge; yet, had it not been for the instrument, our acceleration would not have been noticeable. Once we had reached the limits of the atmosphere and had shut off the gasoline engines and folded the propeller blades behind *contragrav* screens, our car showed no more vibration than if it had been chained to the everlasting rock; except for the changing aspect of the heavenly bodies, it was not at all apparent that we were moving.

Yet for hours it was as if we were falling directly down upon the moon; so that in time it became a little frightening to see its huge grim craters drawing near as if to consume us, its pock-marked face broadening as if with a diabolical grin. Let me not deny that, while I had all confidence in the accuracy of our computations, I was a little relieved when the moment came for changing our course. What if, for some unforeseen reason, our *contragrav* screens had failed at a crucial time? It would have been a little disheartening, I am afraid, to have had to end our flight amid the wilderness of a minor world.

But on and on and on we glided during the days that followed; on and on through the silence and emptiness, the earth now a planetary dot behind us, the ruddy orb of Mars looming ahead, while the sun's disk was narrowing and its light and heat were growing visibly less. Then, when we were within a few million miles of our neighbor world (whose delicate tracery of "canals" had become apparent even to the naked eye), we rearranged the openings in the *contragrav* and adjusted ourselves to the attraction of Saturn—for Jupiter was now on the opposite side of the sun. Our speed by this time was tremendous—well over a hundred miles a second, and constantly being accelerated—yet, to glance out into the surrounding vastness, one would not have known that we were in motion at all.

Rapid as was our progress measured by earthly standards, more than six weeks were to pass before the ringed planet stared at us from a distance of twenty or thirty million miles and we shifted our course so as to be drawn forward by Uranus. During the interval, we had been occupied with our computations, with the adjustment of our scientific instruments, with telescopic observations, with our daily notes, and a detailed "log" of the cruise—and with sheer ennui.

But it was the ennui, I believe, that came out first, since the problem of passing twenty-four hours a day in our cramped surroundings was becoming increasingly difficult to solve. There were our books, of course, but the earthly life they depicted seemed so remote from our present experience and needs! Again, there were the gymnastic appliances, with which we were wont to spend an hour or two a day—but our exercises were weird and fantastic affairs now that we were almost weightless!

Then there were our attempts to signal the earth by radio, though we had no receiving apparatus of sufficient power and could not know whether our signals were heard; and, finally, there were the long, long talks we held, when Stark would sit across from me, neither of us smoking, since we must conserve our oxygen, but both of us engaging in interminable reminiscences, or else in ambitious plans for accomplishment and discovery on Pluto.

Meanwhile the strain upon our nerves was harrowing beyond description. Even though our flight was progressing as favorably as we could have hoped, the long, monotonous pilgrimage

(Illustration by Paul)

Stretching out was a broken plain—fantastic and irregular as the floor of a glacier.

might have proved fatal to any comradeship less strongly cemented than ours.

Despite ourselves, and for no reason that we could afterwards explain, we would have fits of querulousness and irritability; we would sulk, glower, and be ready to take fire at any chance action or remark; Stark's ordinarily good-natured face would grow red with anger, and the sparks would flash in his ordinarily kindly blue eyes; while I would rave like a madman if a stray pin chanced to prick my fingers or a misplaced pencil did not turn up at the precise instant I desired.

But it was not only the monotony and the solitude—it was something ominous and depressing in the very atmosphere about us, something inimical and deadly, as though in the sheer emptiness of our surroundings there brooded unseen demoniac forces.

As human beings accustomed to a warm, blazing sun, we could not easily endure the grayness as of a wintry twilight, which overspread the

space about us long before we had passed the orbit of Saturn; we could not reconcile ourselves to the sight of the diminishing solar orb, whose waning size and brightness spoke to us like the retreating fires of an irrecoverable home.

Nor could we find comfort in the terrific cold of outer space, which seeped into our car despite all efforts to wall it out, so that we had to keep the electric heaters constantly burning, and yet had to dress in heavy woolens and be content with the temperature of a refrigerator. To illustrate the intensity of the cold, I need only say that the water casks in the remote compartment, to which the electric heat could reach only imperfectly, all simultaneously split open one day —from the pressure of the ice inside!

And if such was our condition when our voyage was not one quarter done, what could we expect of the long, long remaining months?

BUT let me pass over those months, except for the terrible culminating events. Somehow —since there was no choice—Stark and I endured the long-drawn-out ordeal; somehow we retained our sanity as we went gliding into the gray void beyond the orbit of Uranus; then as we swept onward for many, many more weeks, and beyond the orbit of Neptune, not long ago deemed the outpost of the Solar System; then further, further still, down into the terrible abyss, in a flight more dreadful than ever a Dante pictured for an imaginary Inferno.

Far ahead, hundreds and hundreds of millions of miles in the distance, the vague form of Pluto was visible to our telescopes, though scarcely larger to the naked eye than a star of the sixth magnitude—and straight down toward this dim, elusive goal we went rushing at a speed that would have circumnavigated the earth in a little more than a minute.

In spite of everything—in spite of our grumbling and groaning during those final weeks, in spite of the snail-like crawling of time, and our doubts as to whether a return flight would ever be possible through these unspeakable distances —Stark and I had every reason to rejoice. Our expedition was proceeding by schedule; no halt or impediment had come in our plans; no important oversight in our preparations had been revealed; hence nothing seemed more certain than that we should arrive on Pluto as we had contemplated.

Little did we anticipate the hidden horror which, through no fault of ours, was to thrust itself upon us from outer space, as though the jealous heavens wished to announce that victory was not easily to be bought.

By the time that we had come within close range of Pluto—which is to say, within a hundred million miles or so — our telescopes clearly showed us its disk, silvery gray and yet forlorn-looking amid the star-littered blackness. Its appearance may be compared to that of a second and paler moon; feebly illuminated by the far-off sunlight, it showed but indistinctly the dark markings that we took to be mountain ranges, and the lighter spaces that were perhaps frozen plains. All about us was a somberness as of late twilight; the sun, a brilliant point whole infinities behind us, seemed of less than the width of a pea; seemed, in fact, little more than an exceptionally bright star shining among the myriads of stars. Had it not been for the electric lights, we would have been unable to do more than fumble and grope about the darkness even had the walls of our car been of glass.

It was when we were careening through the gloomy outer void—when we had been seven months on our way, and when only an eight days' flight remained to us—that an event occurred which might easily have precluded the writing of these memoirs.

Now that I consider all that happened in the sober light of reason, I realize that the peril was one we were constantly exposed to, one which no amount of planning would have availed against, one that might have ended our careers so swiftly that we would never have known of its existence. All in all, we were fortunate to have escaped even so long as we did.

One evening—or, rather, what we called "evening," for the sake of convenience—Stark and I were about to retire, when a peculiar sound—half thudding, and half hissing—attracted our attention. It was not very loud, but there was a dull, sickly quality about it that caused us to stop short in our footsteps, with rapidly pounding hearts. I can best compare it to the impact of a bullet, for it had the same startling suddenness and decisiveness. Yet was it not strange, was it not incredible that such a sound should reach us here in the seclusion of space?

For a moment we stood staring at one another with apprehensive glances, wondering if the noise were to be repeated. Then, as instinctively we glanced in the direction whence it came, Stark gave a low moan of dismay. "Look! Look, Dan! Just look!" he cried, as he seized my shoulder in a faltering clutch.

From my own lips, as I felt the floor staggering and reeling beneath me, there came a gasp of consternation: "Look!" I could only repeat, stupidly. "Just look! Why, it's—it's broken through!"

"Broken through!" he groaned, and darted over to where, on the opposite compartment wall, a small, crater-like bulge had appeared.

The steel about the bulge had been heated to incandescence, and to our ears came a low, sucking sound, as of air escaping.

Even in that first agitated moment, the truth was evident. We had been struck—struck at a sharp angle by a meteorite perhaps smaller than a tiny bead—but the impact of the collision had been such as to perforate the thick steel envelope of our car. Our precious oxygen was rushing out into vacancy!

CHAPTER VI

At the Dread Border-Line

TWO mariners navigating a small craft in mid-ocean, who strike a sunken reef and find the water entering in torrents, could not be in a more precarious position than were we when the *Wanderer of the Skies* sprang its unexpected leak. Indeed, the plight of two such stricken sailors

would admit of some hope, since there might be an island at hand, or another vessel might be sighted before too late; but our predicament, as we drifted through the gray-black abysses several billion miles from human aid, seemed at first to exclude every comforting gleam.

The worst of all possible catastrophes had befallen us; we were losing our oxygen, the mainstay of our existence, the one prop without which human life cannot even temporarily endure. Half an hour, an hour, two hours at the most, and the greater part of our supply would be emptied into the hungry void, and we would gasp out our lives in an unavailing struggle.

So, in that first moment of horrible realization, we both imagined; and our heated fancies, overwrought at the sight of a small hole through which the starlight was visible, found only too generous justification for dismal surmises.

Second by second, as we stared transfixed with terror, the low sucking sound about the aperture seemed to become more pronounced. A faint, barely perceptible wind was blowing in the direction of the opening, where the air, we knew, must be whirling in a minature vortex. Stark's face had grown ghastly white; his hands were violently trembling; while my hands, too, shook like leaves in a gale—but at first we could only stand rooted to the floor, gaping, and doing nothing.

It was Stark who broke the spell. Wheeling suddenly about, while his teeth chattered, he addressed me, "Dan! There is only one way! Rush to the oxygen generators! Work them for all they are worth! Decompose the last cask of water if need be! I will get the welding materials! That hole must be sealed! Quick! Quick! Quick!"

Now what a contrast to our inaction of the moment before! In an instant, the two of us were flying about the compartment like madmen. I plunged into an adjoining room; I dashed for the plugs of the oxygen generator; I made adjustments with one, two, three, four casks of water, turning out oxygen in ten times the quantity we had ever attempted before.

But it was minutes before the instruments could operate; and meanwhile, in quaking impatience, I saw how the wild-mannered Stark was performing his task. He had secured the welding flame and metals—a flame which, alas! consumed still more of our oxygen; he was trying to overspread the aperture with a molten mass that would congeal and shut out all connection with outer space. But this process also required time—time, the thing we could least afford!

When at last the welding metal was almost in readiness, the oxygen was so depleted that not enough remained for good combustion. The welding flame—our chief reliance—burned feebly and low; at first the metal would not melt properly; then, when it did melt, it was solidified too quickly because of the terrific cold of space, which was gradually penetrating our car.

Shivering and faint-headed, we knew that we must not give up.

Our eyes bulged; our breath came in gasping spurts; but we still labored frantically, though our backs were against the wall. It was with trembling relief that at last we found the fresh oxygen coming to our rescue; yet, while only too timely, it barely sufficed to keep us alive. The condition of the atmosphere did not improve; our heads ached unbearably, the flame still burned but poorly, the sucking sound about the aperture had not diminished; the welding metal, even when it did melt, still congealed prematurely, or else, being feather-light, was swept into the outer void by the rush of escaping air. And at last Stark, his brow covered with a cold perspiration, sank down in exhaustion, blew out the flame, and muttered, "It's no use! No use, Dan! Let's not burn our oxygen senselessly. We've got to try some other way."*

"What other way?" it was on my lips to mutter; but he had already sprung up and darted toward one of the storage rooms. In a moment he returned, with a large sheet of tin. "We've got to force this against the opening!" he exclaimed. "It won't block it wholly—but it will help."

"Good!" I cried, glad to grasp even at a straw.

Then I realized the value of the suggestion. Why had we not understood before, that any object placed against the wall would remain there and close the hole effectively until it could be welded? For the pressure of air in the cabin, 14.7 pounds per square inch in excess of that of vacuum of space, would create a force to hold the tin firmly in place.

AT last the hole was covered. Were we saved or not? At first, panting and exhausted, sprawled on the floor with throbbing pulses and whirling brains, we could scarcely put the question. We were almost beyond knowing, beyond caring; we were conscious only of dizziness, cold, and pain; we were like men in delirium, and had only a delirious man's fumbling clutch on reality; we did not even feel greatly concerned whether we should reach Pluto, or drift forever starward in an airless tomb.

I believe it was Stark who first staggered to his feet again; at least, I have a recollection that it was his violent prodding that roused me out of my lethargy and prepared me once more for the struggle. "Come, Dan!" he seemed to be muttering. "Come! It's not quite so bad now! We've got a fighting chance—yes, by heaven, a fighting chance!"

Or was it but my imagination that murmured these words in some crazed dream?

At all events, I knew that I found myself on my feet once more, uncertainly staring into the blanched face of my friend.

"See, Dan!" he was reminding me. "See! The oxygen gauge! Have you looked into the gauge? Just see!"

"The oxygen gauge! The oxygen gauge!" he kept repeating, in tones that were weak and sepulchral and yet revealed some hopefulness. "It's at the same level as twenty minutes ago!"

Still I stared at him with imbecilic lack of realization.

*I can only attribute to the violent mental shock that the sight of the hole produced in us that did not lead us to think immediately of the sensible solution.

"Don't you understand?" he argued. "Don't you understand?—that means we may still pull through! If we can keep on making oxygen as fast as it escapes, we may live till we reach Pluto."

A moment of silence ensued, while the fumes were gradually clearing from my brain.

"But—but have we time?" I gasped, when comprehension had come to me at length. "We're not to reach Pluto for eight days yet. We may not have water enough for so long. Or our electric power may give out."

"True, true," he admitted, hastily. "We will have to hope for the best."

"Besides," I contended, able to see only the darker side of things, "even if we do reach Pluto, we won't have any water left for the return trip."

"True again!" acknowledged Stark, with an ill-concealed groan. "Let's trust we can get some on that planet."

And then once more, without waiting for further comments, he turned to the oxygen gauge with the eagerness of a drowning man.

Now followed some of the most harassing, fear-stricken, torture-ridden hours and days of our career. The tin had been welded on the wall and over that same sheet steel. Now we were waging a life-or-death battle with suffocation, and seemed never more than a few inches in the lead; while at times, in our bleaker moods, we could almost imagine that we felt the stifling fingers at our throats, felt ourselves making the last piteous gasp for air. In every way possible, we were conserving the priceless water; we drank only so much as was necessary to moisten our parched lips; we hoarded each thimbleful like an elixir of the gods; and every stray drop that was spilled was painstakingly scooped up again. Even so, our calculations proved that we would have barely enough; while if our flight should take a few hours longer than we had anticipated, the probability was that we should never set foot on Pluto at all.

Under such circumstances, it is not strange that we had reached an almost insane pitch of nervous tension, so that every unexpected movement and every slight unexpected noise would make us start or jump from end to end of the room. Night and day Stark and I remained busy with the oxygen generators; sleeping in relays; eating by hasty snatches; seeing that the highly charged electric wires were in constant contact with the water to be decomposed—or, rather, with the ice-cakes that held most of our water supply.

Thus, as the days went by, we managed barely to hold our own in the struggle. The oxygen gauge did not fluctuate greatly; sometimes it went up a fraction of a degree, and sometimes down a fraction of a degree; while most of the time the oxygen stood at less than half normal—enough to keep us alive, though not enough to leave us clear-minded or in good health.

Yet now it was that we had most need of being clear-minded; for now we were faced with the necessity of making a safe landing. Guided by previous computations, we had to shut the *contragrav* windows on the side of Pluto at a specified hour and to throw open the windows on the side of the sun, thus subjecting ourselves to a gravitational brake while still hundreds of millions of miles from our destination; and we had to be sure not only that we were descending at a safe speed, but that we were gliding directly toward Pluto. At a predetermined moment we had also to turn our ship about to use retarding rocket simts.

FROM time to time, as Pluto came within a few millions of miles, we would draw open one of the *contragrav* windows for a peep at its expanding features. But what we saw did not prove inviting. The broad round surface still shone with a silvery gray reflection of the sunlight, and still seemed covered with disordered, black-streaked mountain ranges and with lighter-hued plains.

But it showed no sign of anything beyond desolation and death. Even with the field-glasses and hand telescopes, there was no mark of life upon its monotonous, bare expanses; no cloud moved in its atmosphere; no evidence of city or forest, river or sea greeted our eager eyes; but from extreme north to extreme south, from equator to pole and from pole to equator, the plains and mountains shone with something suspiciously white and sun-reflecting.

Why, in the name of reason, had we two denizens of a warmer planet come to throw away our lives amid this frozen wilderness? Was it possible for any creature to live in that utter cold? Was there an atmosphere capable of supporting life? Even if we did at last reach the planet, would not our fate be that of many a lost Polar explorer—except that, unlike such explorers, we could not expect our bones ever to be found?

While oppressed by such thoughts, we had to face a fresh peril. We were a little more than a day's travel from our destination, when we noticed that the oxygen gauge was beginning to fall, to fall slowly and almost imperceptibly, and yet with a steadiness that was disquieting. I well remember with what a gray, worried face Stark set out to investigate; and how haggard, how woebegone was his expression when, after an hour, he hastened to me in the "oxygen laboratory" to announce his findings.

"Dan! Listen, Dan!" he exclaimed, in a voice that shook though he tried to keep it composed. "The aperture seems to have opened again. Only a very little. But our air is escaping."

I stared at him speechlessly, with wide-open mouth, almost upsetting a newly generated tube of oxygen in my consternation.

"Yes, the oxygen is escaping," he continued, more rapidly. "I don't know how to stop it. Haven't we tried welding till our hearts are sick? Then what's the use of burning more oxygen? Besides, we've hardly the time."

With the agitation of a madman, he glided back and forth across the small room. One hand was convulsively raking his long, flowing hair; the other hand was clutching distractedly at his heavy, recently grown beard.

Meanwhile, I still regarded him in silence, not knowing what to say. But oh, how I inwardly cursed my youthful enthusiasm for interplanetary travel! Oh, how I wished to be back on

the safe, sound earth, never even to glance again toward the skies!

And now once more I heard a throbbing voice in my ears, as if in a mocking echo of my own dread. "Within a few hours, at the present rate, there won't be oxygen enough left to breathe! There won't be oxygen enough to breathe, do you hear? What are we going to do about it? What are we going to do? Come, what are we going to do?"

Halting in his rapid preambulations across the room, Stark paused before me with fists violently shaking, as though to fling in my lap the responsibility for the whole disaster.

I do not know how it was, but at that moment, despite my feverish state of mind, an idea came to me. And instantly I recognized it as the only possible saving idea. "How about the gas-masks?" I exclaimed.

"The gas-masks!" echoed Stark, in tones of surprise; and immediately his face was brightened with a look of relief. "The gas-masks? Why, I hadn't thought of them! They will help us for a few hours longer!"

And impulsively he took both my hands, and pumped them up and down with joyous agitation.

There was no need for further explanations. Both of us knew of the gas-masks, with connecting oxygen tanks, which we had provided lest, on arriving at Pluto, we should find the atmosphere unfit to breathe. We understood, also, how those masks would enable us to live for a while in the car even should the oxygen disappear; for could not the gas that we generated be emptied directly into the small storage tanks?

Accordingly, without a moment's delay, we rushed for the masks and hastened to adjust them. They might be no more than the proverbial straw flung to a drowning man—but even a straw was welcome. And so the two of us, encased in huge steel helmets and tanks, unable to eat, to drink, or even to talk, looking ungainly as dinosaurs and feeling strange as men locked in a bottle, were able to stare about us with feelings of thankfulness and even of hope as we prepared for the crucial last twenty-four hours of our flight.

CHAPTER VII

The Last Lap

THE last twenty-four hours seemed as long as the preceding twenty-four days. I often wonder now whether it had been possible for more concentrated discomfort to enter into any man's life: sleepless, hungry, unable to perform most of the normal functions of life, we passed our moments in one endless ordeal of waiting. The steel confinement of the masks become increasingly irksome; the necessarily limited supply of oxygen made us feel like men stifling in an airtight room; the need of renewing that supply kept our hands busy at the same time as it filled our minds with anxiety.

All the while, we were frequently glancing at the fast-approaching Pluto, which did not rotate visibly, but which seemed, like its brother Mercury, to keep one face always toward the sun. The dread of arriving too rapidly, of crashing down to ruins upon its surface, was constantly with us even though we had checked each step of our mathematics repeatedly. Hence we were relieved to notice that, thanks to the retarding rockets, we seemed to be moving relatively slowly by the time the planet was spread beneath us from horizon to horizon in an infinite, curving sheet.

We had planned to come almost to a dead stop fifty or a hundred miles above the surface; after which, balancing a limited amount of its gravitational force against the gravitation of the sun, and aided by the full power of the rocket motors keeping us aloft, we were to descend at a leisurely rate. I rejoice to record that we actually did stop as we intended—although not until after the car had encountered a resisting influence proving that Pluto did have an atmosphere. What type of atmosphere we could not say; yet how we longed to fling off our masks and take a breath of the life-giving air!—if indeed the air were life-giving! But well knowing that, in these upper altitudes, it would be too rarefied to support life, we had to restrain our impatience.

We now took but casual peeps at the approaching planet, which still showed the same features as before, with its wide silvery white plains and its broken and enormous mountain ranges, whose snowy summits were offset by sheer black escarpments and ravines as hideous to contemplate as the craters of the moon.

As we descended, we would clearly have been able to make out the signs of civilized life had such existed; no great city, no considerable-sized settlement could have eluded our eyes, for while the only illumination was the gray twilight shed by the far-off sun and stars, still the frosty white of the surface considerably increased the visibility.

Yet was it not possible that some struggling humans—perhaps just a little like the Eskimos—existed unseen by us even amid the ice-bitten desolation?

During the last few hours of the flight, our problem was to guide ourselves to a favorable landing-place. We must descend somewhere near the Equator, where we might expect the least frigid reception; and we must be careful to avoid the mountains, with their terrible black gorges and crevasses.

Fortunately, the plains were so wide that the second requirement was not difficult to meet; but to accomplish the first end was less easy, since we were headed for a point not far from the North Pole, and only by the most capable manipulation of the *contragrav* screens did we manage to avoid one of the coldest spots on Pluto.

Yet no matter where we arrived, it would be cold enough. Hence, in spite of the encumbrance of the gas-masks, we managed to array ourselves in the heavy fur coats, leggings and boots we had provided for the purpose, until we were as thoroughly muffled as any Arctic traveler. Let the temperature be fifty degrees below zero, and we would now be prepared!

But might the temperature not be even less than fifty below? Might it not be close to absolute zero? As I stared at the desolate frosty ex-

panse beneath us, I was stabbed with misgivings; while, at the same time, it again seemed to my disordered fancy that unseen sinister forces were flitting through the gloom about us.

"At last we have you!" I though I heard them muttering . . . . "At last you have ventured out into our domain, whence you shall not return! At last! At last! . . . . " And mingled with those eerie voices, which surely were the product of delirium, there came another voice, which cackled insanely in my ear, "Look now at dark, icy Pluto, the most forlorn planet in the universe! Look, and behold a prophecy! Read there the future of your own earth! A thousand million years—a mere epoch in the life of the worlds!—and it will be as Pluto is today!"

Of course, I struggled as best I could against such crazed thoughts. Of course, I realized cloudily that nervous tension and the lack of air had produced a fever, a raving madness in my brain. But it was useless to struggle, useless to resist. My head was in a whirl; I continued to hear voices, and to see visions; the most inconsequential sights and sounds would come to my mind: scenes from my childhood, scenes from a laboratory at college, scenes from the iron works where our *contragrav* car was being built; while always a black-wreathed girlish head would nod and nod before me . . . .

THUS, rambling in a dream-like chaos, I gradually lost sight of the real world; of the white plains of Pluto drawing near beneath us; of the electrically lighted car, with the grotesque, mask-laden Stark laboring over the oxygen generators; of the aching pain within my breast, where the overstrained heart had been panting and laboring; of the prod of a furred boot against my leg as my companion strove time after time to rouse me back to life.

It was fortunate that Stark was able to hold out longer than I; was able to retain some command over his dizzy brain, and to perform the necessities of navigation in the last few miles of our trip. I personally had lost contact with outer events by the time we were within fifty miles of the planet's surface; I was no longer in the car, but far, far away on earth.

All that I know is that, after what seemed a long interval of aimless wandering, I had found myself back in my old home, the farm-house where I was born, and was just looking into the smiling eyes of my dear, long-lost mother, who, it appeared, was not dead after all—when all at once my nerves were jarred by the most terrific jolt it has even been my fortune to experience . .

I opened my eyes; the walls about me were vibrating as though in the arms of an earthquake. While I gasped and wondered, there came a second jolt, not quite so severe as the first; then horrible grating and crashing sounds dinned in my ears; and, almost at the same time, the walls quivered once more, though less convulsively than before; then instantly there came a third jolt . . . . and by degrees all grew still.

Stupidly I lay on the floor, fear-stricken, not comprehending what had happened. Before me was a fantastic mask-bearing figure, whom I recognized dimly as my companion. Yet when he made violent gestures in my direction, I gave no response; when he prodded me more energetically than ever with his boot, I moaned inaudibly but paid no other heed. Not until he had gone dashing across the room, had flung open the door, and had disappeared in the outer void, did it come to my delirious consciousness that we had reached Pluto!

CHAPTER VIII

Over the Blue-White Waste

FOR a moment I remained prone on the floor, struggling to recover my wits. Then, with a tremendous effort, I forced myself once more to my feet, and, conscious of a great weight about my shoulders and of a gravitational pull equal to that of the earth, I stumbled through the open door and out to the surface of Pluto.

In that first confused glimpse, my eyes did not take in the details of the landscape. Stretching out before me was a broken plain, fantastic and irregular at the floor of a glacier; huge bluish white masses, piled and tumbled together in crazy disorder, were varied by smooth glistening spaces as flat as a table; twenty-foot mounds and hummocks stood up here and there, and long twisted furrows or cracks spread a spidery black network across the scene; while the prevailing hue, in the wintry gray light of the far, far glittering point of a sun, was that eerie, spectral mixture of blue and white, reminding me of the cloud-filtered moonlight peeping down upon a lake of ice.

But all this I was to notice subsequently; in the first bewildered moment of my escape, there was only one thought to dominate my mind. I must free myself from the gas-mask, whose weight burdened my shoulders, whose confinement had nearly asphyxiated me! I must unbare my nostrils to the open winds, must drink a reviving draught of actual air! True, this alien atmosphere might be poison to my lungs; true, the cold might freeze the very blood within my veins—yet I must take the risk; indeed, I was frantic to take the risk, and clutched at the fastenings of my mask with blind desperation. And within a few minutes, though at first my nervous fingers would not gain any hold, I saw the mask yielding, and felt the burning chill of the outer air against my cheeks.

Colder than ice, the air was yet less cold than I had anticipated. It did not freeze my flesh, nor did it strike my lungs like a blast of poison; rather, it was the most delicious, life-giving breath I ever drew. It seemed to me that the atmosphere was lighter than on earth—light as on some high mountain peak; but it required no chemical analysis to show that it contained oxygen!

No sooner had the mask slipped from about my shoulders; no sooner had I inhaled that first inexpressibly sweet breath and felt the fumes clearing from my brain, than I was startled to see a monstrous-looking gray form shambling from behind one of the tumbled icy projections. Certainly, my wits must still have been rambling!—else I would not have jumped; nor would my

heart have leapt so turbulently and a little half-muffled cry have forced itself to my lips. In a fraction of a second I knew that this surprising shape, whom my mad fancy had mistaken for some Plutonian native, was none other than Stark!

"Oh, so you're out too!" he exclaimed, coming over to me in a delighted manner, while his breath congealed in ice even as he spoke, and his huge fur mittens shielded his face from the cold. "I though I'd have trouble bringing you around!"

"Oh, I'm all right," I testified, although I was shivering, and the sensation of the frigid air against my ears and cheeks was beginning to be excruciating.

"Better get in here, before your face freezes," he advised, as if reading my thoughts. And he pushed me through the open door of the *Wanderer*, in whose electrically heated interior we might enjoy relative comfort.

"With our faces muffled in furs, we will be able to endure the out-of-doors. Thank heaven, the temperature isn't as low as I expected," continued Stark, displaying a small thermometer, "See, only twenty-one degrees below, Fahrenheit. Why, that would be called comfortable in the Arctic."

"Why do you think it isn't lower still?" I started to ask, but checked my own words, for the answer had occurred to me. Since Pluto turned the same face always toward the sun, and since there were no clouds to interfere with the solar radiation, it enjoyed the continuous benefit of whatever sunlight was to be had at this great distance. Were similar conditions to prevail on earth, the temperature on the lighted side would be so high that no life at all would be possible—hence was it surprising that the Plutonian equator was as warm as our own Polar regions?

"Now the thing that you and I need," declared my companion, as the above explanation flitted through my mind, "is food, drink, and sleep. All about us, so far as I can see, there is nothing but ice—it is just as if we had landed in Greenland or the Antarctic Continent. But we can let all that rest for the time being. Suppose we gather a little of the ice and melt it to drink; then let's have a good meal and lie down for a long, sound sleep. After that, there will be time enough for exploring.

"The very thing!" I exclaimed, and thereupon helped to carry out these plans—with the result that, an hour or two later, after a hearty meal, Stark and I lay down amid our furs to the most pleasant slumber we had enjoyed in many and many a day.

RISING greatly refreshed, and consuming an ample breakfast at our leisure, we never so much as thought of offering up thanks for our safe arrival or indulging in any form of celebration. Instead, our minds were with those we had left far, far behind. "If only the folks at home had some way of knowing we got here safely!" meditated Stark. "Too bad our radio wouldn't carry from this distance—even if we could spare the power. Well, it will take a while longer to learn the good news, but our friends will be all the more surprised when we get back to earth. By the way, suppose we have a look at the earth right now!"

Leading me to one of the windows, Stark took up a hand telescope, which each of us used in turn. "Behold there our cradle and home!" he cried, assuming an oratorical pose and pointing to where, not far from the glittering yellowish orb of the sun, a minute shining speck shone amid the vastness of the heavens.

"Behold there the cradle and home of all our kind, a mere dot in the skies, a point amid nothingness! Would you believe it, my friend, the microbes crawling upon that telescopic mote are said to believe that all the immensity of space, the complexity of innumerable suns and planets and galaxies, has been made for their especial benefit!"

With a loud guffaw, Stark slapped his knee; then, pointing once more toward the minute, barely visible particle that may have been the earth, he stood peering at me with a satiric twinkle in his eyes.

"Come, Andrew, can't you be serious?" I demanded, impatiently, for I was not in a mood to hear my native world disparaged. "Let's forget the earth, and decide now how to explore this planet!"

"Yes, but what is there to decide?" questioned my friend, flinging himself into a seat, and staring at me contemplatively, while his long legs were outstretched before him in the most ungainly manner imaginable. "We will simply have to plan for a jaunt of three or four hours, and take equipment enough to last that long—which is to say, our heaviest furs, a little food, ropes and axes to help us over the ice, and possibly matches, flashlights, and spy-glasses for an emergency. Also, I think we'd better provide our shoes with spikes, for I've found it mighty slippery manipulating over that ice."

"Good!" I acquiesced. "Very good!" Yet a sudden shuddery sensation overcame me as I thought of crossing those blue-white frosty reaches. "But don't you believe—don't you believe we'd better go armed?"

"Why not?" he shrugged, reaching for a pair of revolvers that hung on the wall. "It's unlikely that we'll encounter any living things; still, the best motto in a strange country is to take no chances."

"Now there's still another thing," I asked, beset by a doubt that had troubled me ever since our arrival. "Judging from the looks of things around us, do you think we've come down on land? Or is it that we've descended on a frozen sea?"

Stark twisted up his mouth into a peculiar wry grimace. "I hope not a frozen sea—for that would limit our opportunities for investigation. We'd have to go up in the *Wanderer* again, and come down somewhere else. On the other hand, there's no way yet of telling what is what. We'll simply have to bide our time till we find out."

I nodded; and, without further ado, we went about our preparations. We fastened heavy spikes to our shoes; we inspected and loaded the revolvers; we provided ourselves with food, compass and other necessities; then, so thickly furred that only our eyes were visible amid the hairy

folds of our garments, we passed through the door of our car, closed it behind us, and started out across the wintry plain.

Now, of all times, we should have felt elated; for was not this the moment of dreams come true? Yet, for some reason that I cannot explain, neither of us exulted. Stark trudged silently at my side, absorbed in his own reflections, while his steaming breath hardened in frosty flakes upon his beard and clothes; while I, no less silent, was overcome with a violence of melancholy and nostalgia that made me bite fiercely into my lips in order to keep back the tears.

Perhaps it was the blank desolation of the scene that overcame me, the interminable, tumbled wastes with their unreal, ghostly beauty; perhaps it was the solitude and the silence, the knowledge that no living thing moved in the stagnant air, or crawled or flitted across the ice-sheets, or called out shrilly or querulously to mate or young.

Had there even been some goblin monster to animate the plain; had a polar bear crept out from behind some ice-block, or a pack of wolves skulked shadow-like to our rear, or some weird toothed or beaked thing scurried panic-stricken from our path, we might have shuddered, but we would have been reassured; for life would at least have been around us, and when is life so terrible as death? But the absolute stillness, the absolute emptiness, the absolute tomb-like solitude made the horror almost too great to be borne.

Lost!

GLANCING up at the gray, star-littered sky, with the remote gem-like sun set in one unchanging position, I again asked myself what insane choice it was that had taken us to this world of waste and silence. Was there anything to see here, anything to discover? should we find more than ice, and further ice, and further ice, with the pitiless stars gazing down upon emptiness, and the pitiless blue-white wilderness staring up at the desert sky?

Now and then the swift streak of a meteorite gleamed from the heavens, bringing us remembrances of an earthly night; now and then the firmament was crossed by silken, wavering bands of light that reminded me of the aurora borealis; but, except for such flashes and glimmers, it seemed to me as if this world would roll on forever and forever without a change, without a movement, without even the sign or phantom of activity, meaning or life.

Accordingly, it was a relief even to feel a faint pulsation in the atmosphere; to feel a weak wind arising as if to bear us thoughts of the earth. True, the breeze made the cold more difficult to bear; yet we could only welcome it, even though it gradually increased in force; and we plodded on our way with a greater assurance and cheerfulness.

Nowhere, however, did the scene show any sign of a change; unending ice, varied by patches of clotted snow, made up the totality of our experience; carefully, but unavailingly, we looked for the footprint or relic of some living thing; while without expectation, and without success, we sought for the sign of some crude dwelling or hut.

It was only after about an hour that we did make a discovery; that we came suddenly upon a great black projection with precipitous sides fifty feet high, and recognized in delight—a wall of rock!

Simultaneously we stopped short, pointing to this telltale object. "Rock!" we exclaimed, in one breath. "We are on land!"

"On land! Land! Land!" I repeated, as though there were magic in the sound. "So this isn't a frozen ocean!"

"No, not unless it's an island projecting from the water!" exclaimed Stark. "But that isn't probable. Come, let's look more closely."

As well as we were able, we examined the cliff. Its beetling, weatherbeaten sides, overhung with icicles, showed a scarred, irregular surface proving it to be some form of granite; but further features seemed to be lacking, and we were about to turn away when Stark called my attention to some peculiar-looking markings near the base of the rock. With the aid of flashlights, we inspected them closely, much to our bewilderment—were they or were they not of natural origin?

Of about the thickness of a man's wrist, they were cut several inches into the stone in a series of jagged, perpendicular lines, giving an appearance remotely like that of hieroglyphics. Oddly enough, there was a regularity about them suggestive of human workmanship; yet, at the same time, they were unlike any man-made markings I had ever seen.

Had they been caused merely by the scraping and tearing of the elements? So I would have liked to believe; for I shuddered at the thought that human beings may ever have been here, though in some distant, warmer age. A chill, not wholly from the cold air traveled down my spine; and before my excited fancy there glided the ghosts of the long-dead Plutonians, upon whose graves we might even now be treading.

So long did Stark and I linger examining the rock-markings that we scarcely noticed the change in the atmosphere about us; scarcely noticed that the breeze of a few minutes before was rising to a gale. Only when the world resounded with the intermittent screeching of a storm-wind, which howled and hooted eerily from the far-off vacancies, did we have thought of possible danger or decide that it was time to return to the *Wanderer of the Skies*.

Even so, we were not alarmed; at first Stark even found time for scientific speculations. "To come to think of it," he pointed out, as we started off together, "isn't this just what one would expect? Isn't it inevitable that Pluto should be a world of violent storms? The cold air from the unlighted side must rush with terrific power to the areas of lower pressure on the warmer side; and this must give rise to tornadoes beside which those of the earth would seem mere tempests in a teapot."

"Yes, yes, undoubtedly!" I cried, realizing only too vividly the soundness of this contention.

But it was becoming painfully hard to speak, and we hastened on our way without another word. Progress, we found, had suddenly grown much more difficult; the wind, sweeping about us with a surging, maniacal fury, bent our heavy, fur-laden garments as beneath an iron weight, and the numbing cold penetrated to our skins.

AT times, confronted with a particularly severe gust, we had to crouch low behind some mound of ice, and wait for minutes before we could proceed; at other times, on some exposed, slippery surface, we had to creep on hands and knees; and all the while the gale, as if possessed by some mocking demon, seemed to be growing louder and louder, fiercer and fiercer, and to eat and tear at us with shriller, more determined force.

Amid the lunging fury of the elements, in which white particles of ice and snow were whirled about like sand-grains, it was difficult to find our way; indeed, we soon lost sight of our former tracks; and had it not been for the compass, which pointed toward the south, we would not have known how to retrace our course. But inwardly we thanked the gods for granting us this saving instrument; while, creeping, crawling, staggering across the blown and screaming waste, we forced ourselves onward and onward toward the haven of our car.

I do not know whether there was some peculiar electrical force in the Plutonian atmosphere that played havoc with the magnetic needle; or whether we had miscalculated our course or direction, or the storm had made us lose our bearings. At all events, I know that after we had covered about a mile—which was as far as we had originally strayed—we began to look expectantly for our car, but no car appeared.

The very features of the landscape were unfamiliar; it seemed to us that the piles of ice were higher than before; that the surface of the ice was more tumbled and irregular; that the fissures—which confronted us at frequent intervals—were wider and more dangerous, so that once or twice there was actual risk of slipping into them and being engulfed.

But all these variations in the scenery, we told ourselves, were merely imagined; for we knew how different the same territory may appear when viewed from various vantage-points.

And so on and on we pushed, the storm constantly growing more severe, our efforts constantly growing more difficult, our panting bodies drawing constantly nearer to exhaustion; while the cold was seeping more and more bitterly through our garments, and there appeared to be no way to keep it out. Not yet would we admit the peril to ourselves; but we began to look still more anxiously for a certain familiar gray sphere—a sphere whose seventy-foot form, when we had last left it, had loomed conspicuously above the surrounding country.

Was it possible that the *Wanderer of the Skies* had vanished like a bubble? Was it possible that its enormous form, still more than half covered with *contragrav* and hence light as a balloon, had been blown away by the storm? We did not believe so, for we had not neglected to moor it with ropes; but, on the other hand, we had no way of estimating the ferocity of the elements that assailed it.

At all events, we caught no sight of the great machine; though after a while, with excruciating difficulty, we had advanced a distance that made it futile to continue. And so, moving slowly and ever more slowly, we began to retrace our steps, while our eyes hopelessly searched and searched the landscape.

The wind screeched and snarled more vehemently than ever, with many a gust of impish laughter; the blue-white waste spread out before us more desolate, more spectral than before, while the small flying particles beat into our eyes and impeded our progress. The dim, blinking stars and the puny, remote sun stared down at us from their same pitiless eminence, aloof and uncaring; and we, crouching from time to time in some dim recess or cranny in the ice while the gale whirled and battled past, still pressed on and on, we scarcely knew whither, across the limitless, hostile solitude.

Each tried as best he could to keep his feelings from the other; but both of us, with sinking hearts and scarcely audible groans, were at last forced to admit that we were lost.

CHAPTER IX.

Into the Depths

IN the lives of most men, there comes a moment when unforeseen death suddenly confronts them. Some individuals, at such a crisis, will throw up their hands in bewilderment, and not even attempt a fight; others will struggle although in agony, and will not surrender until natural forces their capitulation. But in the case of Stark and myself, there was simply no choice; we simply had to press on among the gigantic ice-fields through the growing storm. For the conflict was wholly physical, and our minds set aloof and helpless; it was a battle between our own endurance and the strength of the elements; while in the background sat chance, grinning and unseen, the last court of appeal, the silent arbiter of our destinies.

Amid the sweeping, whirling confusion of wind that beset us, beating down with a pummelling force, screeching more furiously and ever more furiously, and driving the tiny white particles in storms that grew thicker and thicker, progress was by yards and half yards, by inches and half inches. We crawled and we staggered, we slid and we stumbled, we crept around exposed boulders and wormed our way on all fours through icy caves and fissures.

It came to us, in a confused fashion, that perhaps our best chance would be to make ourselves a rude snow hut, in Eskimo fashion; but alas! there was not enough free snow at hand, even if we had known how to build such a shelter; while we could not afford to pause, since only by keeping moving, and moving, and moving could we save ourselves from being frozen. Even as it was, we felt the cold seeping down our arms and legs, attacking our toes and fingers, nipping

at our nostrils and ears, and spreading in shivery waves along our spines.

By this time, half blinded by the vehement gusts, we had almost given up looking for our car. Within our breasts there was only numbness and misery; we were ruled only by the stark, groping instinct of self-preservation, and did not know or plan where we were going.

Only one thing we were careful about: to keep always within sight, even within hand's grasp of each other, for once either had lost touch with his companion, what would be the chances of a reunion in this wailing wilderness?

Yet, in spite of the hungry eargerness with which we each clung to the other, I was to have the shock of seeing Stark disappear. Yes, disappear literally and wholly! vanish as if the earth had swallowed him! He had been plodding forward a yard or two ahead of me, crouching low like an ape in the effort to withstand a gale that seemed bent on blowing him away—when all at once his humped form was no longer visible.

I thought that I heard a dull, crashing sound, accompanied by a scream; but such was the pandemonium of the elements that I could not be sure. All that I know is that he had slid out of sight!—and that I, stopping short and clutching at my heart, could not have been more startled had he evaporated.

Yet the explanation came to me almost immediately; there was some sort of crevasse or depression in the ice. But that thought was scarcely a consolation—what if he had plunged a thousand feet below?

It was therefore with intense relief that, having crept forward a few paces, I saw a large circular opening in the ice, and observed Stark in the act of picking himself up from a flat surface eight or ten feet beneath.

Evidently his heavy fur garments had protected him from serious injury, although he was rubbing his shins in a pained manner. But, having descended, he apparently did not intend to climb out again; he motioned me to join him, and this I did after some difficulty, for I realized that even such a rude shelter would offer us a relative protection.

Even to this day, I do not know what possessed Stark and me to explore that depression in the ice. About a hundred feet in diameter, with straight circular walls, its very existence was a cause for wonder; though it might have been due to the impact of a gigantic meteorite. Why, then, did we feel an immediate, compelling desire to study it from end to end?

Shivering and miserable as we were, could we not have made ourselves temporarily secure against one of its rocky walls, and so have outlived the blizzard? But no! it was as if some guiding spirit were at hand, protecting us, leading us on, assuring us of new and fantastic adventures, and providing that our voyage to Pluto should not be wholly in vain.

WE had almost completed our circumnavigation of the depression, when suddenly we stopped short before a black, pit-like opening in the ice and rock. It was not more than seven feet across, and was partly blocked with an icy accumulation; but, despite this obstruction, we were immediately struck with its geometrical regularity of design. Even in the uncertain light, we could see that it formed a perfect circle; that the curves were much more exact than nature usually accomplishes. Was it possible that it was of artificial origin?

Trembling at this thought, we turned our flashlights fully upon the opening. The cavity was black, black as the vacancy of starless space, and slanted down on an angle of forty-five degrees apparently into profound remoteness. But this was the least interesting of its features! Just beneath the rim, and as far down into the abyss as we could see, the rock had been cut out with mathematical regularity in a definite pattern! The floor of the pit was not unbroken!—it reached down in a long series of steps!

Or, to be more exact, the rock had been chiselled out in blocks a foot thick, a foot wide, and nearly three feet long; while all the successive chisellings had been ordered by the same plan, and there was no perceptible difference in the proportions of the various steps. Who could doubt that they had been designed by intelligent beings?

For a moment, Stark and I stood stockstill and speechless; then, of one accord, we began to examine the upper stairs in detail. They were encrusted in ice, which may have covered them for a year, a thousand years, or a thousand thousand years. Yet, from the thickness of the coating, we agreed that probably they were of ancient origin.

"Perhaps made by the last survivors of the Plutonian race, before the cold exterminated them," suggested Stark, whose teeth were chattering as he spoke. "Guess we'd better explore a bit."

I must confess that that dark, mysterious tunnel, sloping down into the bowels of the planet, did not look enticing to me. At the same time, our present position was little more enticing; we had found a partial shelter from the wind and cold, but it was far from all that we could desire. We were still swept by the frigid gusts; our numbed fingers were still stiff, and the chill had not left our spines; while the storm, instead of showing signs of abating, was whirling about us with a howling frenzy that seemed to be on the increase, and the showers of small white pellets which were shot down upon us were growing each moment more harassing.

But if we descended a short distance in the tunnel, would we not be protected? Would we not be able to pass the hours in safety until the storm subsided?

It was with this hope in mind that, after a final glance into the black depths, I nodded to Stark, and the two of us slowly began to descend.

If we had any lingering doubt as to the skill of the tunnelmakers, that doubt was soon dissipated. Down, down, down, step by step, each of us guided by a flashlight, we made our way into the abyss. There was no break, turn or irregularity anywhere discernible; the walls above us were smooth as glass, and the ceiling rarely many inches above our heads; the steps were of

a uniform depth, width and length, and the angle of our descent remained unvarying.

For what purpose had the tunnel been designed? Who had designed it? and when? I could almost imagine that the shades of the makers hovered in air about us; that they were grinning or nodding malevolently; that they lifted filmy fists in menace, or opened fleshless jaws in mockery; that perhaps they were crowding about us thickly as gnats, and all the while were grinning, muttering, mumbling in some outlandish tongue.

Stark too, I noticed, was proceeding as if beset with apprehensions; he spoke not a word; his breath came in short, heavy gasps; and his manner was groping and cautious and his eyes staring and questioning as they followed my motions by the rays of the flashlights.

(*Illustration by Paul*)

With the silvery meshes wound so tightly about us that we could hardly breathe, we were rolled away amid a gibbering escort.

A Subterranean Mystery

"COME, Andrew, let's turn back!" I proposed, after we had gone many hundreds of yards and found no change or new sign of interest in the whole long gallery.

He stopped short, and peered at me in a doubtful silence; then haltingly requested, "Just a little further, Dan. This tunnel must lead somewhere. Let's find out where."

"Oh, very well," I conceded, reluctantly. And as we silently started once more into the gloomy recesses, I felt for my revolver to make sure that it would be ready in case of need. But how guess what a tremendous difference that last decision of ours would make?

Before we had gone a dozen paces, I felt Stark clutching at my arm in sudden excitement. "Look!" he exclaimed, sharply. "Look, Dan! See!—there ahead of us!—on the wall!"

"What's there ahead of us?" I demanded, with a start of fright; while to my mind came visions of gruesome subterranean creatures.

The beams of the flashlight were now focused in a revealing circle upon a point almost within hand's grasp. And instantly I saw! The wall was covered with markings!—deeply engraved markings in a series of jagged, perpendicular lines, similar to those we had observed above ground!

"Well, what do you say to that?" cried Stark, grasping me about the shoulders in quaking agitation. "The writing of some intelligent people!"

I stood staring at the hieroglyphics, too much astonished to reply. Were the makers of the markings still alive? Or had they all perished ages ago?

But if they were still living, would it not be perilous to thrust ourselves upon them without formality? So I demanded of Stark, who only laughed at my misgivings. "What? Afraid of dead men?" he mocked. "Why, most likely there hasn't been another living thing down here for a million years!"

Even as he finished these words, his whole form shuddered convulsively; once more I felt him clutching violently at my arm. "Dan! Dan!" he ejaculated, hoarsely, while staring down the long passageway like one who has seen a ghost. "A light! A light!"

"What light?" I demanded, while a wave of dread shot down my spine.

"A light down there! Way down there!" he mumbled, pointing into the depths of the tunnel. "I saw it plainly!"

For several seconds I gaped in the indicated direction. But only the deep, unyielding blackness met my eyes.

"Don't you think your imagination is running away with you?" I remonstrated. "Evidently the darkness is getting on your nerves. Didn't you say only dead men—"

"Why, there it is! There it is again!" he shrilled, in the same startled manner as before. "I saw it clearly—a low, dim light! It seemed to glide across my range of vision—and vanish. Like a lamp carried by a human hand!"

"Strange that you saw it and I didn't!" I protested, while struggling to keep up my own courage. "Come now, I'm sure there's actually nothing there." And then, after a momentary silence, "Well, ready to go back now?"

"Go back?" he echoed. "Go back, just when things begin to get interesting? No, Dan, not me! I'm going to see what caused that light! I'm sure it was no hallucination!"

Although it was my own private hope that it was indeed no hallucination, what could I do but agree to accompany Stark?

But now until now had I been conscious of the full terror, the full uncertainty of our adventure. Here we were, the two of us, travelers from a far-off world, descending a tunnel of whose purpose or builders we knew nothing; descending into the depths of an unknown planet, perhaps into the very arms of merciless foes.

The smooth, sloping stone walls, reaching through the darkness just above our heads and all about us, suddenly struck us as intolerably confiding; the still, musty air, permeated with the mouldy odors of centuries, seemed dismal and noxious as the air of a prison. The curious acoustics of the tunnel, in which every whisper sounded preternaturally loud and every muttering was magnified into a roar, had a tormenting effect upon one with overwrought nerves; while the heavy breathing of my companion as we cautiously stepped down and down, our flashlights wavering through the blackness, served only to accentuate my sense of something heavy bearing down upon us, something ominous, something foreboding, something eerie and unparalleled in human experience.

I have no idea how long that descent continued. It may have been only minutes, but it seemed like hours; I have only the impression that we covered hundreds of steps without noticing any difference in the straight, sloping vastness of the gallery. All the while, however, I was aware that the air was growing denser and mustier; and that the temperature was rising, until our fur coats were becoming a burden. So profusely, indeed, were we perspiring, and so heavily were we breathing that at last it seemed a matter of a few paces at most before we would have to halt or turn back.

MEANWHILE, though we both kept steady watch, the lights which Stark claimed to have seen did not reappear. I was becoming more and more confirmed in my opinion that they had been mere illusions—when all at once my own eyes beheld something which made me gasp and stop short. It was not exactly a light; rather, it was the suggestion of a light; the blackness ahead of us seemed not quite so black as before, seemed to have been softened to a blank, heavy gray, like that of skies at late twilight. So gradually had the change occurred that I had not noticed how or when it came about!

"Well, what's that?" demanded Stark, who had observed the phenomenon simultaneously. "Surely, there is light ahead!"

"Better not be too sure," I cautioned. "It may vanish—like those other lights you saw."

Stark grinned, and started energetically on his way again. And I, who had no course but to follow, jogged in his footsteps while my gaze still searched and searched the abysses beneath. To my astonishment, the deep gray circle below gradually grew a little less hazy of outline; gradually began to be penetrated by a dull illumination from some mysterious source. And at the

same time, as if to add to our bewilderment, our cheeks were fanned all at once by a faint current of air,—faint, but unmistakable, and wonderfully refreshing to our nostrils!

"Where under heaven can that breeze come from—here, hundreds of feet underground?" it was on my lips to ask. But I kept my thoughts to myself, while my eyes were fascinated by that dim luster ahead of us, a luster gradually expanding into a faint silvery whiteness, with something of a ghostly quality that made it seem like a lantern viewed in a dream.

"Surely, surely, we *are* dreaming!" I told myself; and I bit my lip and prodded my own sides to make sure that I was awake. For how, in cold actuality, was it possible to find light here beneath the planet's surface?

"Radio-activity, perhaps. Yes, radio-activity. Or else some buried volcanic fire," I was assuring myself—when of a sudden we made the most surprising discovery of all.

Without warning, our tunnel had come to an end! Due to some deceptive arrangement in the faint silvery light, which presented the illusion of interminable distances still to be covered, we had reached the bottom while we imagined that we were still on the way! Not precisely the bottom, it is true!—but the bottom of our own tunnel, which emptied into a greater cavern whose existence we had not previously suspected.

This second gallery, which extended in a horizontal direction as far as our eyes could follow, was the source of the mysterious silver illumination, which still remained mysterious, since it filled the corridor from no visible luminary. The gallery itself was of the most singular shape imaginable—its sides were patterned on the plan of an equilateral triangle, and the distance from the base to the apex was perhaps twenty feet.

As for the floors and walls, they were hewn out of solid granite varied by the peculiar jagged markings we had already observed; while so even were the lines of the corridor, and so exact the proportions, that we murmured in surprise at the engineering skill of the excavators.

From the bottom of our tunnel to the floor of the gallery there was a drop of about six or eight feet; but we observed no ladder, stairway or other easy means of descent. The question now arose whether or not to go down to the floor of the main gallery; for while it would be simple enough to climb back if we had the time, we were by no means certain of being able to return in an emergency—and we well knew that an emergency might arise.

"Well, at least, we have our revolvers," pointed out Stark, tapping significantly at his belt. "If the worst comes to the worst, we'll have a fighting chance."

"Still, wouldn't it be wiser to stay here for a while and see what happens?" I suggested. Personally, I prefer to look before I leap."

I do not know what it was that overcame me at that moment; whether it was merely by the irony of the fates that I lost my footing, or whether the sly hand of Stark helped the fates along. At all events, I do know that, an instant later, I had gone whirling through vacancy and found myself sprawled on the surface of the lower gallery.

It was under the plea of coming to my rescue that Stark slipped down beside me, and laughingly ascertained that my worst injury was a skinned knee. But it seemed to me that there was a tinge of triumphant joy in his tone as he proposed, "Well, Dan, since we're here, suppose we stay? I'm all ready, if you are. Shall we start out to the right—or the left?"

And with these words our exploration of the triangular gallery began.

CHAPTER X

The Creatures of the Cavern

IT was only a few minutes before our discoveries began to multiply. The triangular gallery, along whose interminable reaches we had begun to wander, was only one out of the many! Other galleries, not triangular in shape, but curved or rectangular, shot out in all directions like side-streets from a city's central thoroughfare. Some of these were of smaller proportions; one or two were of equal size or larger; but all alike were cut with mathematical regularity through the solid rock; all were glowing with a faint radiance from some invisible source, and all were deserted as a tomb.

As if these branching corridors were not sufficient cause for wonder, we came at length into a sort of court, octagonal in shape, and with a ceiling about fifty feet high. Its surprising features were not the smoothness or the evenness of the walls, but rather the designs that decorated them,—designs blended in every conceivable hue and shade—a veritable symphony of color!

What they represented we could not say; all that we could make out was a confusion of strange, whirling, writhing, sinuous forms, in which creatures half human-shaped were doing a snake-like dance. But, surely, the evidences of human handiwork were accumulating to a disquieting extent!

Leaving the multihued court, we were cautious to advance always in a straight line, lest we lose our way amid the labyrinth. But already we had gone too far; about a mile or a mile and a half from our point of descent, our gallery abruptly started downward, at an angle of twenty or twenty-five degrees. And Stark, advancing despite my protest, made two discoveries after going only a few yards; a large metallic screen-like arrangement on the upper walls of the corridor, through which the air was able to flow as through a ventilator; and an enormous opening, five or six feet across, which gaped from the floor of the tunnel, but was likewise covered with a metallic screen.

Curiously the two of us bent down to examine this unexpected device. The metal, which seemed to be some sort of an iron or iron-and-nickel alloy, was fresh-looking and beautifully polished, almost as though placed here only yesterday. Could this appearance be deceptive?

Even as this question flashed through our

minds, it was answered from an unlooked-for source.

All at once, our ears were startled by a loud rattling sound. Only a few yards away, where the gallery began its descent, a heavy sheet of metal, propelled by no visible power, was clattering from its hiding-place among the rocks, to cover the tunnel-entrance and cut off our path of retreat. Its movement was not rapid—but, alas! we observed it just a fraction of a second too late; in our terror-stricken dash for the entrance, we had just time to thrust our hands through the closing aperture, and then to withdraw them in haste lest they be crushed.

Now, while we stood staring at one another with drawn white faces, a still more frightening demonstration met our ears. There was a roaring from the screen-covered hole in the floor; a tremendous gust of foul-smelling hot air, like a furnace blast, burst out upon us; we found ourselves in the midst of a perfect gale of heat and of evil, unimaginable odors, which blew upward from the floor with such violence that we had to struggle to retain our balance.

How furiously we stormed now at the closed gateway! beating at the unimpressionable metal till our fists were bruised and bloody! crying out till our lungs were hoarse with insane screams and pleas! Over us both the idea had flashed that our presence had been discovered; that the builders of the galleries, seeing us although unseen by us, had devised a scheme to snare and asphyxiate us. Were we to be doomed like rats in a trap?—to be slain without even a chance for our lives? So we imagined, as we stood there clutching and beating at the wall, while over us both there rushed a mad, all-powerful desire for freedom, for fresh air, for the unhampered open spaces.

Possibly our imprisonment lasted for many minutes; possibly it endured only a minute or two, as the clock records time. Yet whole worlds of suffering and terror were condensed into that period; whole worlds of screaming, tense-fisted fury; a dozen miserable deaths—the concentrated wretchedness of a lifetime! What then was our joy when the roaring in our ears suddenly subsided! When the wind of foul vapors ceased, and we found ourselves once more in silence! With manifest relief glowing on features that looked years older, we stared speechlessly at one another—after all, we were not to be asphyxiated!

But now appeared a new source of alarm. What were those strange noises, those hoarse, gruff noises, which arose from beyond the closed gate? I can best liken them to the grunts of savage beasts, to the mutterings of enraged grizzlies—even to hear them was to shudder. Yet did they not have a variety, a persistency of utterance that was not quite beast-like?

MINUTE after minute those sounds continued, sometimes barely audible, sometimes rising in a swift booming succession, sometimes subsiding to a sort of throaty drawling especially unpleasant to our ears. Oh, that we had had the eyes to see through that wall of metal!

"Whatever they are, do they know we're inside here?" whispered Stark, in tones almost too low for me to hear. "Shall I give them a reminder?"

"Better not," I cautioned, feeling for my revolver. But after a muttered, "Anything's better than staying here!", my comrade let forth a yell at the top of his voice.

The effect was instantaneous. The sounds from behind the wall rose in a swift, guttural chorus, as though many individuals wished to be heard all at once. There was a series of bellowings and shrill cries, mingled with lower-voiced ejaculations suggestive of surprise; then followed some confused gabblings, and some mutterings so low that we could scarcely hear them—then all at once, to our consternation, there came a clattering sound, and the metallic gate slowly drew open.

We may have been prepared for some curious sights, but surely we had expected nothing like the strange reality. Here were not the beasts which the gruff voices had led us to expect! Yet here were creatures only remotely human! Half a dozen shimmering forms, slender as children, but close to seven feet in height, stood before us in many-colored costumes of rainbow design. Their faces, doughy pallid, were each dominated by two enormous bulging greenish eyes; their long pole-like arms and legs were naked, their high foreheads were overlooked by pates innocent of hair, their many-jointed fingers were nearly a foot in length, and numbered seven on each hand.

But what really distinguished the creatures—what gave them their singular, unearthly appearance, and set them off from humanity—was not their size or bulging eyes or the length or number of their fingers, but a glowing phosphorescent orb about three inches in diameter which grew in a socket at the top of the head of each of them—a lantern of flesh and blood, reminding me of the lights of deep-sea fishes!

At the first glimpse, we could do little more than take in the general features of the strangers. Meanwhile they were performing a similar service for us; for a moment, they stared at us without moving, while their greenish, baby-small mouths slid open, and their greenish eyes burnt and glittered queerly, and the lanterns on their heads flashed more brightly and more brightly, changing weirdly in hue, till they looked like golden searchlights.

Then all at once—almost before we had recovered from our first gasp of surprise—a peculiar babbling arose simultaneously from all the creatures, their lamps took on a lavender tint, and their thin forms rocked back and forth in the throes of some uncontrollable convulsion. Not until this demonstration had lasted many seconds; not until they began tapping, tapping significantly at their heads, did we realize that they were laughing.

Afterwards, we were to understand that the reason for their laughter was that we had no head-lamps—which made us seem as strange to them as a man without any head at all would seem to us. But this we did not realize at the time; hence we grew indignant to meet with such an unseemly reception. And, in our misapprehension, we made a serious blunder.

Reaching into our revolver cases, we drew forth our weapons and brandished them high in air.

Neither of us had any intention other than to make an impression; yet here again chance betrayed us, for it was not by design, but because of my heedless excitement, that my fingers inadvertently pressed the trigger.

The ensuing flash of flames, the smoke, the noise, echoing down the closed corridor like the report of a cannon, had exactly the effect that we might have anticipated. Suppose that a native of Mars or Jupiter were to come to the earth, and that his greeting should be to hurl a bomb! Should we not look upon him in dread and hostility? Should we not hasten to put a distance between him and ourselves?

So it is hardly surprising that the Plutonians, after their first terrified screams and yells, speedily made an end of our encounter. No one had been hit by the bullet; but no one seemed to desire to wait to be hit. With lightning swiftness, the strangers one and all whirled about, and, with the agility of antelopes, began racing away along the corridor. In a moment the last of them, gibbering with fright, had swept out of view, and Stark and I were once more free to pursue our explorations.

CHAPTER XI

Trapped

"WELL, now I understand!" exclaimed Stark, in a self-congratulatory manner, as the last of the Plutonians whisked out of view. "Now I understand those lanterns I saw from the dark stairway. They were the head-lights of passing natives!"

Being more interested in safety than in explanations, I attempted no answer to this statement, but suggested hastily, "Well, Andrew, don't you suppose it's time to be getting out of here? I'm afraid we've made ourselves unpopular enough already with those long-fingered devils."

Stark nodded; and, without a word, we began to retrace our footsteps. Finding the temperature unbearably warm, we halted long enough to divest ourselves of our fur coats; then, with these articles dangling from our arms, we pressed on our way as rapidly as our shaken and weary condition would permit.

For a few minutes, our progress was unimpeded. The straight, triangular gallery, with its silvery illumination, stretched out before us silent and untenanted; once again there was nothing to show that we were not wandering through a land of the dead. At last we reached the court of the multi-hued decorations, and realized that the stairway to the outer world was not many hundreds of yards off; then, as we darted forward with exclamations of relief, an unforeseen obstacle intruded. All at once, the lights went out!

I have no way of picturing the terrorizing suddenness of the effect. I can only say that we were plunged into blackness—blackness absolute and impenetrable. Not the flicker, not the suggestion of a light trembled about us from the thick emptiness; it was as though we had been hurled to the pitchy bottom of the sea. "Andrew! Andrew!" I gasped; and, reaching out a swift arm to grasp my friend, I swung it with a crash against the cavern wall. "Andrew! Andrew!"

At the same time, I heard him just beside me, muttering beneath his breath. "Damn the accident!" he mumbled. "Dash those lamp-headed demons—"

But suddenly he broke short. What was that hoarse, throaty noise from somewhere in the darkness? Could it be the heavy speech of the Plutonians?

For a second or two we remained tense and motionless, listening. Then all at once the sound was repeated, nearer and more threatening.

Only now, in our terror, did it occur to us that we need not remain in utter darkness. Only now did we remember our flashlights, and fumble for them with uncertain, panic-stricken movements. It was a minute before we could extricate them from amid our masses of clothing; but at length, while Stark was still groping in the gloom, I found mine and switched it on.

No sooner had the beams penetrated the darkness than there came, from just ahead of us, a shrill, startled cry. I thought I saw a shadowy form that shot across the gallery and vanished; I thought I heard a scampering as of swift feet, and made out a yellowish light crazily wavering. But that was all—in less than a second, sights and sounds alike had faded, and Stark and I were again in undisputed possession of the corridor.

"Guess we're safe enough for the time being!" muttered Stark, as he also found his flashlight. "Let's go ahead!"

Side by side we set out again through the darkness. Though our hearts were pounding like hammers, we still believed it possible to reach the stairway and safety.

But we had reckoned without the opposing forces. Like the savage who disdains the prowess of the white man armed only with a little shining stick, we had underestimated the resources of the enemy. Literally, we were like flies in a spider's web! When we had gone only a few yards, Stark and I began to be conscious of annoying little bands and streamers that entangled our feet and impeded our progress.

At first we paid little heed, since the flashlights showed them only as the thinnest little silvery threads, too frail and slender-looking to be worth attention. We did not anticipate how they were to multiply as we advanced, nor how our arms and our whole bodies were to be obstructed, until it was as if our pathway were lined with tall, dense brush. Even so, we did not begin to suspect the nature of our antagonist; nor did either of us know the extremity of terror until suddenly, as by one accord, we stumbled, and in falling lost our grip upon the flashlights, which flickered and went out.

OUR descent, although precipitate, had not been painful, for we were arrested by something soft and down-like. But never shall I forget my sensations as I strove to pick myself up again. Now at last I could appreciate the feel-

ings of the deer crushed by the python! To my horror, I could not rise to my feet! It was as if unseen hands were holding me to the floor; as if unseen arms, yielding, insinuating, irresistible, were winding about my neck, about my shoulders, about my entire form! All that I could feel was those delicate, silken strands—and oh, how many of them there were, and how strong!

It did not matter how many I evaded or broke; always there were others, and others, and others, others and others and others still; so that the more I struggled, the more speedily I was entangled. By the hundreds, perhaps by the thousands, the tiny threads were around me, caressing me like living things; soon my arms could only squirm convulsively; soon my legs could only kick weakly and unavailingly; soon my whole body, prone on the gallery floor, could only writhe like a fly stuck on the flypaper.

Meanwhile close at hand, where another form threshed and struggled in the darkness, I knew that Stark also had been caught.

In my battle with the unseen, I had no time for anything except mad terror. I had no time to reflect on the meaning of what had happened; to ask whether we could expect anything better than death at the hands of the Plutonians . . . . Fortunately, we were spared the ordeal of long waiting and questioning. Of a sudden—so unexpectedly that we blinked, and were momentarily blinded—the gallery flashed once more into brightness; and our startled eyes, staring out from amid silvery meshes, made out the forms of several Plutonians gazing down upon us in silent speculation.

For several minutes they remained staring at us without speech or motion; while their headlights, which evidently had been switched off, were one by one re-illumined. Then at last the leader of the band—a giant, who must have approached eight feet in height—made a peculiar grunting sound, and four of his fellows slid down on the floor beside Stark and myself.

Now suddenly we were to appreciate the advantage of having fourteen long, many-jointed fingers. No earthly hands could have worked with the dexterity displayed by the Plutonians; they manipulated like marvelous and infinitely adaptable machines, machines so swift of action that we could not follow them with our eyes. Almost before we realized it, they had reached among the entanglements of our garments, and removed every detachable article—matches, compass, foods, etc., all of which they examined with a curious attention.

Then one of them drew forth my revolver, which he threw into a corner, and which immediately discharged, to every one's loud-voiced terror, but with no other result except to make a black hole in the floor. Following this incident, the Plutonians handled us with a little more respect; but that did not prevent them eventually from wrapping their long fingers about us and lifting us bodily into a three-wheeled canoe-shaped cart; after which, with the silvery meshes wound about us so tightly that we had trouble to breathe, we were rolled away amid a gibbering escort.

Within a few minutes we reached the end of a low, short gallery, from which a black hole about five feet across shot off into vacancy. Regardless of our howling protest, the cart we lay in was shoved toward this opening and slowly forced through it. It may be imagined that we twisted and struggled as furiously as our bound condition would permit; for we fancied we could read the mutterings of a malevolent glee in the excited speech of our captors; and we had visions of being flung into some tremendous chasm, to have our bones battered upon the rocks a thousand feet beneath. Yet our protests were like the cries of a child caught in an avalanche; down into the darkness we were pushed deliberately, remorselessly; we heard a door clatter to a close behind us; the throaty speech of the Plutonians grew faint in our ears, and there was a grinding of wheels and a roaring as we went whirling away through interminable space.

But, at least, we had not been dropped into emptiness. The wind rushed past us in a torrent, while our car traveled, perhaps on rails, around long curves and windings, guided as if under intelligent direction. At first, in our bewildered state of mind, it did not occur to us that the controlling force was gravity; that the curves and grades of the tunnel had been calculated with mathematical precision; that we had been consigned to some particular destination, as certainly as a letter sent through a mail tube.

All this we were not to realize until later; hence it was with intense relief that, after minutes and minutes of traveling, we finally felt the headlong speed of the car relaxing; felt the vehicle moving more and more slowly, like an automobile coasting to a stop, till ultimately it halted with a jerk as though it had struck some solid barrier.

An Inspection

FOR a moment the darkness all about us was still impenetrable . . . . Then, of a sudden, there came a blinding brilliance, a gate flashed open before us, and we heard a tumult of heavy voices. And immediately we were surrounded by loudmouthed bands of Plutonians, and carried out into a place of unimaginable weirdness and beauty.

Nothing we had seen in the galleries above could have led us to expect the scene now opening out before us. Never in our maddest dreams had we conceived anything similar to this gigantic corridor, this world beneath a world, which darted before our astonished view. At the first glimpse, we could only gaze and gasp, wondering if our senses were not deceiving us; it was only by degrees that the full features of this buried universe began to make themselves plain.

Picture a cavern large enough to contain a city; a cavern with arching, vaguely illuminated rocky roof five hundred feet high; a cavern a thousand feet across, and longer than the unaided eye can discover. Picture the walls patterned of fifty blending pastel shades, all of them ever-changing from some invisible source of radiance; picture niches containing intricate and tremendous carven figures, which likewise shift in color as though played upon by unseen lan-

terns; picture the whole vast gallery supported by no columns and yet shaped into a series of cyclopean domes, each fashioned with such precision and symmetry that one could stare and marvel never-endingly.

But, in the beginning, Stark and I had little chance to stare and marvel. Dazzling, awe-inspiring as was the cavern, our attention was fastened more closely upon the mob that surrounded us. At the first glimpse, we could see that many of them were not like their fellows whom we had already observed. All were distinguished by lamps growing at the tops of their heads and frequently changing color, from purple to vermilion, and from vermilion to golden, and from golden to violet; all, again, had features pale as dough and great bulging greenish eyes; and all were fourteen-fingered, and so slender as to remind me of walking reeds.

But, aside from this, they manifested a great variety of appearance: their height was most uneven, and ranged from three feet to eight; while the size of their heads was subject to a great diversity; here and there strode an individual with a head four times larger than the average, and such persons numbered possibly one out of every fifteen or twenty.

But even more striking was the difference in the costumes of the Plutonians: some wore shimmering multi-hued garments such as we had first encountered, others displayed diaphanous white robes transparent as gauze, and still others, including most of the big-headed species, had dispensed entirely with artificial encumbrances, and walked in unashamed nakedness.

Upon our arrival, Stark and I were lifted bodily out of the car by half a dozen of the tallest natives and carried to an elevated stone platform, about whose base the lamp-heads had gathered in a vociferous concourse. Then, greatly to our relief, the strands that bound us were untied, and we had the pleasure of being able to stand once more on our feet.

Surrounded by a guard that made any attempt at escape unthinkable, we were allowed to flex and unbend our stiffened muscles, and meanwhile we noticed how agreeably warm was the atmosphere, and how fresh and sweet—quite unlike anything one would have expected underground.

During the brief delay, while we were exercising and rubbing our arms and legs and restoring the checked circulation, I noticed that our fur coats lay spread on the floor of the platform, and that two lamp-heads were examining them through microscope-like tubes with the most ridiculous gravity. They would pass the lenses over each bit of the surface in turn, squint their green eyes, and allow their head-lamps to revolve in all directions; and after each stage of the inspection they would turn to one another, nod in a puzzled manner, utter an unintelligible something, hold a hair or patch of hairs to the light, and then return to the examination.

MEANWHILE the members of the mob below were pointing to us excitedly; gibbering; and significantly tapping their heads; while from time to time we heard babbling explosions of laughter. It was only too evident that the spectators regarded us as some sort of a circus exhibition!

What was more, they had not long to wait for the performance to begin. After a few minutes, an imposingly tall figure edged his way out of the multitude, which cleared a path respectfully before him. One of the great-headed type, whose upper extremity seemed vastly too big for his slender shoulders, he was the largest Plutonian we had yet seen, and towered to a height well in excess of eight feet.

Like many of his brainy-looking brethren, he wore no clothes; yet we were puzzled as to the sex of the creature, and were unable to determine whether he were male or female. I can only say that the pallid stick of a body was hairless and unprepossessing, and seemed to us to display the charms neither of Apollo nor of Venus.

None the less, it was evident that he was a person of distinction, for upon his arrival on the platform a silence fell across the assemblage, and all stood waiting with their greenish eyes blazing and their tiny open mouths upturned in expectation.

Establishing himself in cautious proximity to a stairway about ten feet to our right, he launched into a series of grunts, hoots and mumblings evidently addressed to us. Every few seconds he would pause, stare at us as if he expected a reply, and then proceed with a different intonation. But although he must have made fifty or sixty tries, the results were always the same. Long before he had finished, the changes in his manner and accentuation had made it apparent that he was a linguist testing us in various languages —possibly even dead languages. Was it that our origin had not even been suspected?

Finally, after exhausting his repertory, he seemed to come to the conclusion that we were either unfathomably stupid, or else were deaf and dumb. For he lifted his fourteen long fingers, and manipulated them as if motioning in the sign language; while, from the eager look in his jade-like eyes, it was clear that he expected a response.

Our patience having been exhausted, Stark and I both opened our mouths at once to speak. "Come, we're not dummies!" exclaimed he, forgetting that the Plutonians did not understand English. "No need to talk that way—" I started to protest . . . . when hundreds of babbling voices broke out in a contagion of laughter that cut us rudely short.

Even our interlocutor could not resist the general uproar, and for several minutes he rocked back and forth in gusty mirth.

But after the tumult had subsided, he evidently felt that the examination had proceeded far enough. Without further delay he motioned to a group of shimmering-gowned individuals, who mounted the platform, formed themselves about Stark and me in the manner of a military escort, and marched away with us into the depths of the vast vaulted gallery.

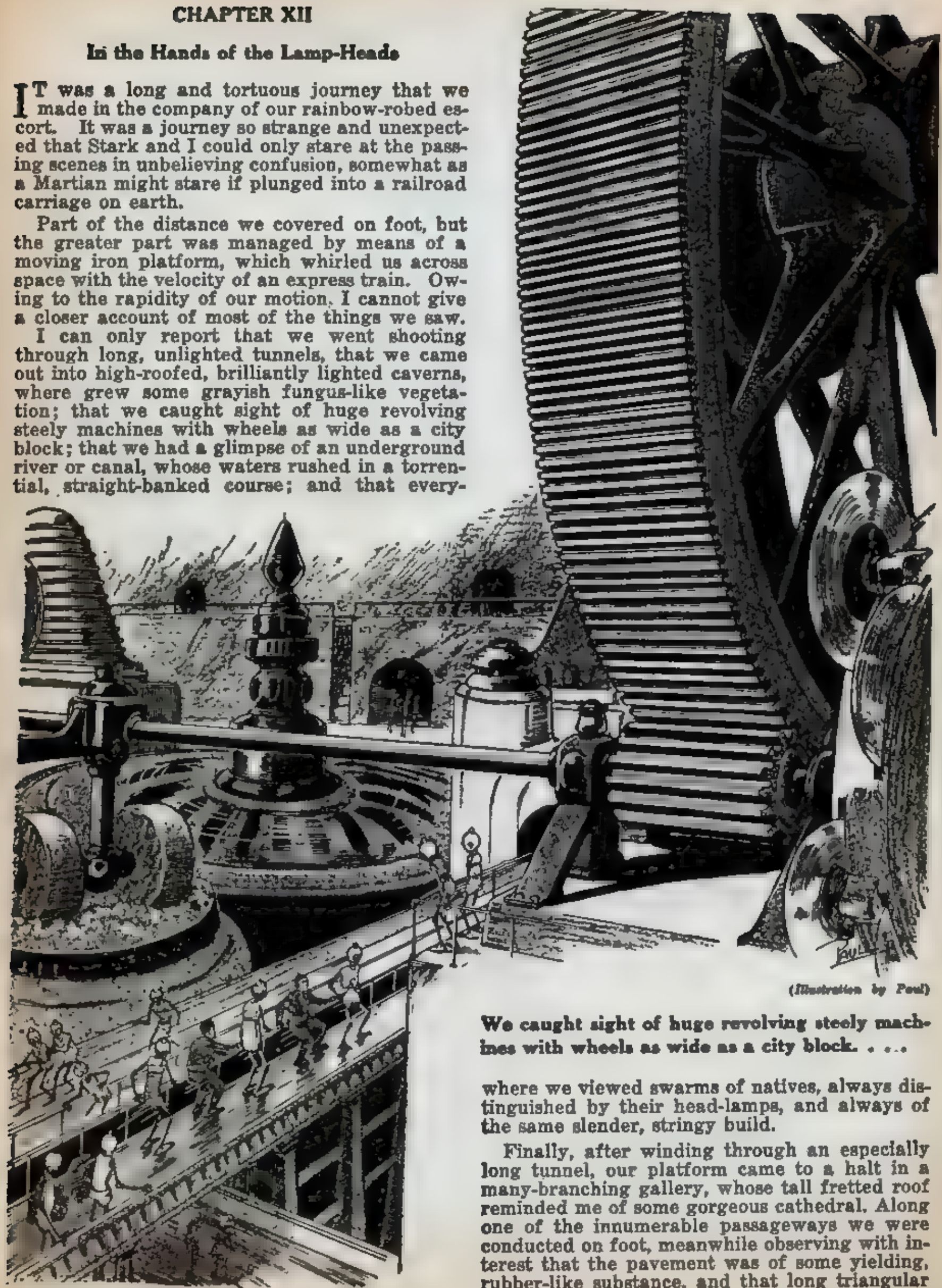
CHAPTER XII

In the Hands of the Lamp-Heads

IT was a long and tortuous journey that we made in the company of our rainbow-robed escort. It was a journey so strange and unexpected that Stark and I could only stare at the passing scenes in unbelieving confusion, somewhat as a Martian might stare if plunged into a railroad carriage on earth.

Part of the distance we covered on foot, but the greater part was managed by means of a moving iron platform, which whirled us across space with the velocity of an express train. Owing to the rapidity of our motion, I cannot give a closer account of most of the things we saw.

I can only report that we went shooting through long, unlighted tunnels, that we came out into high-roofed, brilliantly lighted caverns, where grew some grayish fungus-like vegetation; that we caught sight of huge revolving steely machines with wheels as wide as a city block; that we had a glimpse of an underground river or canal, whose waters rushed in a torrential, straight-banked course; and that everywhere we viewed swarms of natives, always distinguished by their head-lamps, and always of the same slender, stringy build.



(Illustration by Paul)

We caught sight of huge revolving steely machines with wheels as wide as a city block. . . ..

Finally, after winding through an especially long tunnel, our platform came to a halt in a many-branching gallery, whose tall fretted roof reminded me of some gorgeous cathedral. Along one of the innumerable passageways we were conducted on foot, meanwhile observing with interest that the pavement was of some yielding, rubber-like substance, and that long triangular

openings, evidently doors, were to be seen at frequent intervals. But neither of us recognized this as a residential section, until at last we were ushered through one of the doors and into a series of enormous rooms with arching ceilings and windowless, tapestried walls.

The light, we noticed, was melllow and even, and transfused the apartments from some invisible source; the air, likewise, was blowing in a current we knew not whence; the furniture was of the simplest, and consisted only of some marble chests on which our hosts squatted cross-legged, in the Oriental fashion; while the floors were multi-colored mosaics apparently commemorating some fabulous series of events.

It was upon entering these rooms that Stark and I had one of the greatest shocks of our lives. Suddenly our ears were assaulted by the most terrific bellowing we had ever heard; and out of an inner chamber leapt a lanky black monster, big as a colt, and with six great sprawling legs. His cavernous greenish mouth, set with spiky teeth, was opened like a crocodile's; a yellowish foam played about his curling lips; his long, donkey-like ears stood erect; a red lamp glowed on his head; and his little red eyes glared with a malicious fire.

With a swift, lithe jump he was upon us; his foul breath was hot upon my cheeks; his deep-voiced howling dinned in my ears; I felt one of his great paws upon my breast as he reared upon his hind legs. In that terrified instant I was ready to give myself up for lost; I shrank back against the walls, and screamed in the paroxysms of my dread; nor did I notice the laughter that convulsed the lamp-heads.

I only know that I did not feel the expected tearing claws; that the Plutonians uttered something sharp and rattling, and that the great beast instantly turned toward one of our guides.

To my amazement, the Plutonian stroked the black hairless skin affectionately, and even received and fondled one of the terrible hooked paws. And the beast opened its ferocious-looking mouth in a yawn, and uttered a sound like a low contented purring.

After our introduction to the Plutonian dog —as Stark and I named the brute, although it might equally well have been called the Plutonian tiger—the lamp-heads motioned us to squat upon one of the chests. This we did after a little hesitation, although not without an uncomfortable longing for chairs. Several of our escorts now retired, but in a moment returned, bearing metallic vessels containing water and various suspicious-smelling pasty substances, which they placed before us expectantly.

It was as if they had read our thoughts, for we were both hungry and thirsty; but while we accepted the water gratefully, we regarded the various pasty concoctions with prolonged hesitation. All of them were most unappetizing to our nostrils as well as to our eyes; the most pleasant-looking reminded me of a form of blue glue, while the others ranged in appearance from mouldy flour to stewed sawdust.

In addition, there were a few small white capsules, which, judging from the gestures of our hosts, we were particularly urged to partake of; but, suspecting that they might contain some sort of drug or poison, we avoided them in favor of the other articles.

OBSERVING no knives, forks or spoons, we were about to plunge in with our fingers, when we were dissuaded by the laughter of our new friends, who pointed gleefully to long tubes sticking from the vessels and made significant sucking motions. Accordingly, each of us doubtfully applied our lips to the end of one of the tubes, and so sampled our first Plutonian food. The result, I am sorry to say, was not to our liking; Stark's wry face was certainly matched by my own; our mouths were filled with a taste as of stale mush—with the cream and sugar omitted.

Besides, there was a certain peculiar, vaguely chemical taste that added to our repugnance—so that, had we not been almost famished, we would surely not have partaken. By way of alternative, of course, we tried the other dishes; but the results had little to commend them, since each concoction seemed less savory than the last.

However, let me not be so ungrateful as to speak ill of our hosts, who, as I later learned, had offered us of their best. And let me not say anything unkindly about the ordeal that followed, which doubtless also was intended for our good —the ordeal of making us into imitation Plutonians, by the simple method of a change in dress. Without so much as giving us warning or asking our leave, several of the lamp-heads began to fumble about among our clothes; and, almost before we were aware what was happening, we stood half disrobed.

Apparently not understanding the principles of earthly apparel, they had ripped off the buttons in the act of removing each garment; but we found it useless to resist their marvelously dextrous seven-fingered hands, which seemed capable of ten motions while we were performing one. At last, despite our protests, we were wholly naked; and as we huddled before them in embarrassment, we had to submit to having our bodies examined in detail, while repeated exclamations suggestive of wonder or surprise arose from the gathering as each new wart, tuft of hair or carbuncle was inspected.

Our beards and moustaches were particularly the subjects of attention, and were scrutinized and pulled again and again in a manner to evoke loud cries of resentment. Worst of all, just as the investigation began, there arrived one of those topheavy Plutonians with the extra-sized heads; and he it was who led in the inspection, and who, after each new finding, would turn to a small white object that we took for a notebook, and excitedly jot down some strange marks.

For some time, even after the examination was over, it was apparently doubtful whether we would be given clothes at all. While we stood shivering, a heated debate arose, in which every one except Stark and I participated, and which the six-legged beast punctuated with occasional howls. But in the end, fortunately, the pro-clothes party emerged victorious; the hubbub died down, and two of the lamp-heads vanished, to return almost immediately with some shim-

mering, multi-hued costumes, such as we had observed on many of the Plutonians.

Now began a battle royal. It was as if they had tried to fit a wild boar into the skin of a gazelle; for both Stark and I, while tall and fairly slender as men go on earth, were much too short and vastly too stout for the sinuous Plutonian garments. Even though the clothes were made of some substance that stretched like rubber, our limbs would not adjust themselves to their outlandish proportions; nor would their proportions adjust themselves to our limbs.

The result was that our new apparel split in many places, leaving strips of our skin exposed; but this did not deter our persecutors, who ended by slicing off a foot or two of the costumes, leaving us in possession of the rest, splits and all. For footgear we were then presented with slender straw-like sandals; and thus, arrayed in the native fashion, with bursting clothes that shone and shimmered as we walked, we made a spectacle that our friends on earth would have found it hard to recognize.

It may be imagined that, thanks to the unusual hardships of the day, Stark and I were now weary to the point of exhaustion. But here once again fortunately, the Plutonians seemed almost to have read our thoughts. After spreading mats and pillows of some bamboo-like substance across two of the chests, they motioned us to lie down; and this we did with the utmost willingness; following which they mumbled something unintelligible, and, accompanied by the bellowing beast, retreated from the room.

At the same time, with welcome suddenness, the lights went out. The darkness about us was now absolute; the silence was complete; so that in another moment Stark and I, forgetting the scenes and adventures of the day, had left Pluto worlds and worlds behind us in dreams of a planet where men wore no lamps on their heads but laughed in the heartening light of the sun.

CHAPTER XIII

Enter the Third Sex

I SHALL not weary the reader with an account of the monotonous days and weeks that followed. Stark and I were prisoners, although prisoners treated without severity; we were confined within a series of connecting rooms and corridors that seemed to comprise a small world within themselves; we were forced to devote our attention, during the greater part of our waking hours, to a study that proved fascinating even if irksome, but that we realized to be of the utmost importance. In a word, we were being taught Plutonian.

Each day—or each period of about twenty-four hours, which constituted the native unit of time—several tutors would take turns for hours in giving us an elementary education. Their method in the beginning, of course, was wholly by means of signs; they would perform various actions, or would point to various objects and to the various parts of their bodies and make appropriate sounds, after which they would scribble the corresponding symbols on bits of parchment-like paper—and we would be required to repeat the performance after them, both as to the writing and as to the speaking.

But evidently we did not make good pupils. From their disgusted gestures, I know that they regarded our progress as discouragingly slow. I writhe even in memory to think of the disdainful grimaces with which they heard our efforts to imitate their thick-mouthed speech; and I clench my fists in involuntary anger when I recall their condescending manner upon noting our attempts to string sentences together grammatically. "Grangrum! Grangrum!" they would repeatedly mutter to themselves—an expression which I later learned to be the equivalent of our word for dumbbell.

Nevertheless, when I remember the difficulties of their speech, which would put the verbs first, nouns second, and adverbs, adjectives and prepositions last, I believe that both Stark and I made remarkable progress, and that we did very well in being able, within a few weeks, to combine words and phrases in an understandable if not a grammatical order, and so to hold our first conversations.

It was only natural, of course, that our minds should be swarming with questions to put to the Plutonians; but it had hardly occurred to us that there might be an equal number of questions which they were eager to put to us, and that they had perhaps educated us for this very reason. At all events, when they finally decided that we were capable of exchanging views, there ensued a most interesting colloquy, in which fully as many queries were put by them as by us.

Not less than eight or ten distinguished-looking Plutonians had been summoned for the occasion. All of them were of the huge-head variety, with brilliant top-lamps constantly changing in color, and with little or no clothing; and all of them carried pads of the parchment-like paper, upon which they wrote voluminously.

Not until long afterwards did we learn how we were being honored—for that delegation, though we did not even suspect it, included the planet's foremost anthropologist, a representive of its most influential newspaper, one of the heads of the Plutonian international State, and two of the world's leading zoologists.

Perhaps, had we realized the eminence of these personages, we would have been awed into silence. But, as it was, we were only too eager to display our limited speaking abilities, and to put and answer as many questions as we could.

After the party had arrived to the tune of a weird music wafted from some unseen radio, they all seated themselves crosslegged on mat-covered chests; and the most imposing-looking of them all—he who, we later learned, was prominent in the affairs of State—soberly began the interview.

We could not catch more than half of his opening words; all that I can say is that his fellow investigators looked interested and applauded abundantly. But we did make out the drift of his concluding sentences, which were to the effect that our arrival had created a world-wide consternation, and that there were several theories

as to our origin, but that none had been finally accepted.

"So now we want you to decide for us," he ended, speaking slowly and deliberately, and picking only the simplest words, as a grown man might do when addressing a four-year-old. "Tell us, where is it that you come from?"

ALL the gathered lamp-heads leaned forward breathlessly; and there was a moment of tense silence before Stark replied:

"It is as you have probably guessed. We do not come from this world. We come from far away in outer space."

A chorus of excited ejaculations filled the room. "Not from this world? From far away? From outer space? What does he mean? Preposterous! Preposterous!"

Our interlocutor, the renowned statesman, alone preserved an unruffled gravity. "Comrades, do not be disturbed," he counselled, lifting seven reassuring fingers. "This is just as I have suspected. We all know, of course, that there is no such thing as another world—the very idea is absurd. But what our friend means is that he comes from deep down in this world."

"No," exclaimed Stark, "that is not what I mean!"

Disregarding this outburst, the Plutonian continued, "Now you know, comrades, that not all the world has been explored. Far, far down, where the heat grows great, and where all things become lighter and will fall but slowly, we have not dug our galleries.

"But there are legends that galleries have been dug even there, and that barbarian races, unlike our own, inhabit them. Perhaps some of these aborigines—" here he pointed significantly to his head—"have not advanced to our own high stage. Perhaps some of them are even lacking in the most important of bodily organs, the lamp. Now is it not possible that such unfortunates, if they exist, should from time to time send up scouts to explore the civilized lands?"

The speaker ended impressively, and the other lamp-heads nodded agreement.

Of course, Stark and I tried our best to convince them of their error. We assured them, as well as we were able, that we had not come from anywhere on their own planet; that we had originated on another sphere, a sphere so far away that it would take light several hours to cover the distance. With our limited knowledge of the native language—which seemed to have no words for "planet", "Earth" or "sun"—we had great difficulty in making our ideas plain; in fact, the greater part of what we said passed completely over the heads of our auditors. They were, however, able to understand our references to the speed of light, and in particular to the time it would take light to traverse the distance from our own world—and their thin, pasty faces, at this information, were twisted into comical smirks, and they all were convulsed with babbling laughter.

When their merriment had subsided, one of them—whom I subsequently came to know as a famous scientist—screwed his tiny mouth into an expression of almost ludicrous gravity, and stared at us reprovingly with his great greenish eyes.

"I would have you understand," he growled, "that we are serious investigators, who will stand for no flippancy. The truth, and the truth alone, is what we want. Now every one knows that, at the distance from us which you mention, there is nothing at all. Only blackness, and empty air. Or else but dead rock, without tunnels or galleries.

"We have never been able to decide which, although tradition says that far above our galleries are open spaces, from which our ancestors retreated ages ago. But that was before history began, and the old legends have never been confirmed. We only know that no one, within remembered times, has been able to venture more than a certain distance upward without perishing in the cold. And yet you mean to tell us that you come from a million, a hundred million times as far?"

New spasms of laughter convulsed the investigators. It was several minutes before they were able to relax into seriousness; and when they did so it was our turn to attempt a questionnaire. We inquired as to their knowledge of the sun, the stars, and the planets, but found that, as we had already surmised, the heavenly bodies were not only unknown but inconceivable to them.

It appeared that there was indeed an ancient myth as to the existence of such luminaries, but no one now regarded it as anything more than a fabrication of the childhood of the race. From all that we could make out, it seemed to us that, in the beginning, the Plutonians had lived on their planet's surface, but had been driven underground long, long ago when the growing cold had threatened them with extermination,—so long ago that the recollection hardly existed now even as a racial memory. Hence what possibility of making them understand about our own origin?

An Exchange of History

ALTHOUGH there were a thousand questions which Stark and I should have liked to ask regarding life underground, the production of food, and the regulation of the air supply, we had to restrain our impatience while we listened to views and queries regarding ourselves. What particularly seemed to interest the members of the committee was our lack of top-lamps; they all regarded our lightless heads with an irritating sympathy, and seemed to look upon us as we might look upon the blind; while one of them went so far as to ask how we managed to find our way in dark places, to read in the dark, or to enjoy life generally without these appendages.

"Besides," he added, in the most incomprehensible manner, while his head-lamp glowed from violent to a deep purple, "how do you contrive to convey your feelings?"

We both stared at him in confusion. "Why, have we not tongues?" Stark at length managed to sputter.

Immediate laughter was his response.

"Your tongues may possibly convey your thoughts," conceded our interviewer, after his

mirth had subsided. "But how about your emotions—the real essence of your life?"

"What have head-lamps to do with emotions?" demanded Stark.

A fresh babbling of laughter echoed throughout the room. And some of the Plutonians, it seemed to us, nodded to one another as one might when a child asks some impossible question.

But the explanation was quickly forthcoming. Upon being persuaded that we actually did not know what they were laughing about, one of the scientists went on to report:

"Well, among our people, you see, head-lamps are the most valuable registers of emotions. They are flawlessly accurate, because we cannot control them except by covering them or deliberately letting them go out. Each subtle shade of feeling is represented by a different hue or color in the head-lamp; and there are so many hues and colors that I cannot begin to mention them all.

"Thus, if one of our people is a little frightened, his head-lamp will turn a faint yellow. If he is more frightened, it will become a brighter yellow; if he is terrorized, it will glow to a brilliant yellow. Again, if he is annoyed or irritated, it will take on a pink shade; if he becomes slightly angry, it will turn light red; if he is enraged, it will leap to a vivid scarlet. And so with all the other colors. Each expresses a particular emotion, and there is no emotion which they cannot indicate. It is therefore impossible for any of us to conceal our feelings while our lamps are burning; one has only to glance at a neighbor's head to know what is going on in his heart."

"So you see," added another Plutonian, while he felt caressingly for his own luminary, "so you see what you miss by not possessing a lamp!"

I smiled in acknowledgement; yet it seemed to me that I was not missing a great deal in being able to keep my feelings to myself.

The Plutonians, however, were still profuse in their expressions of sympathy. One of them even suggested that, since we could not indicate our feelings by means of head-lamps, we had no feelings to indicate at all. And this view was accepted by most of the company.

After commenting unfavorably on our red lips and five-fingered hands, the investigators now turned their attention to our beards and to our hair, which they examined with a solemn interest, inquiring how it came to be there and whether it was natural or had been planted.

Their original impression was that it was a species of vegetation sown by means of spores or seeds; and it was only after the most exasperating argumentation that we could relieve them of this idea. Even so, some of them could not be convinced, for nothing like hair, they assured us, had ever been known to their people; the nearest thing to it in appearance was a certain grass-like weed which they grew to feed their domestic animals.

Leaving the subject of hair still undecided, the Plutonians turned to an even more pertinent question. "What is your age?" they inquired, while several of them bent expectantly over their note-books.

Since the gauge of Plutonian time is not the same as our own, we had to ponder before replying. Their year is equal to several of our centuries, and the common measurement of time is the *sequon*, which consists of four hundred of our twenty-four hour days, and is therefore equal to a little less than fourteen months. Accordingly, it appeared that Stark and I, who were approaching our twenty-ninth year, were each about twenty-four *sequons* of age.

This face we conveyed to our interviewers as soon as we had performed the necessary process of mental arithmetic. But little did we expect the result.

"Twenty-four sequons!" they all exclaimed, in chorus. "Impossible! Impossible!" And their head-lamps blazed to an orange that, we afterwards learned, was indicative of astonishment.

"Impossible?" echoed Stark and I, in one voice, wondering if we had represented ourselves as Methuselahs. "Why, most men in our world live much longer than that!"

A BABBLING of laughter, accompanied by lavender lights of amusement, was our only response.

"I don't see why you should doubt us!" protested Stark, a little indignantly. "Is twenty-four sequons so very long to live?"

The renewed laughter that greeted this outburst was several minutes in dying down.

"My friends, you have a peculiar humor," stated one of the Plutonians as, regarding his gravity, he soberly addressed us. "But humor is out of place; we are looking for facts. Of course, we know that you must be more than twenty-four sequons of age, for in spite of your puerile ideas, you are plainly not children. Since the accepted age of maturity is fifty-four sequons—"

"Fifty-four sequons!" muttered Stark. And then to me, on the side, "Why, that's more than sixty years!"

"As the accepted age of maturity is fifty-four sequons," proceeded the Plutonian, a little annoyed at the interruption, "we must recognize that as your minimum age. Most likely you are three or four times as old. This stands to reason, since persons of less than a hundred or a hundred and fifty sequons are hardly to be regarded as having completed their education, much less as being released for the duties of adult life. From that age until six or eight hundred—"

"By the sacred gods!" I burst out, unable to hold back these words in English. "Do you suppose we're older than Christopher Columbus?" And then, checking myself and returning to the Plutonian speech, "Tell me, how old do people here get to be?"

The Plutonian stroked his hairless face with seven meditative fingers. "Well, not so old as we should like—not by any means—though science, of recent ages, has added scores of sequons to our lives. The average person, I am sorry to say, does not live to be more than nine hundred or a thousand; while only in a few unusual cases fifteen hundred or even two thousand have been recorded—"

"Two thousand! More than two thousand years!" I gasped, reverting again to English in my excitement.

"How old do your own people get to be?" inquired one of the Plutonians, noting our amazement.

We informed him that sixty or seventy sequons marked the usual limit—a statement which, I fear, was taken just a little skeptically.

"Sixty or seventy sequons!" cried one of our hearers. "Why, that is barbarism! It is a criminal waste! To throw your lives away in the very bud! Is your science then so undeveloped that it cannot repair waste tissues, replace wornout organs, and renew the human frame for even a few hundred sequons?"

Being forced to admit the charges, we were informed how, by a process of creative surgery, the Plutonians were able to remove every part of the body as soon as it showed signs of decay and to supplant it with new tissues developed in the laboratory. Thus, in the course of thousands of sequons, the average life had been prolonged to ten times the original length.

When at last, to our relief, the Plutonians had abandoned the question of our age as another unsolved enigma, they turned to a subject that was to prove even more embarrassing.

"Which of the three sexes do you belong to?" one of them startled us by asking.

"Three sexes?" we gasped, uncomprehendingly.

"Three sexes, of course. Which are you—male, female, or Neuter?"

"Why, what—what do you mean by Neuter?" sputtered Stark reeling as if from a blow.

The orange hue of surprise was apparent on the head-lamps of all the company.

"By Neuter," explained one of our visitors, shaking his head as if to say that really we were quite impossible, "by Neuter we mean just what we say. We mean, of course, neither male or female. Look at me—" here he pointed to his long unclothed body—"it is my pride to be a Neuter myself. And so, I need hardly add, are most of our other distinguished guests."

"Then a Neuter really has no sex?" demanded Stark, as a smile of faint comprehension shot across his face. "He has nothing to do with—with racial perpetuation?"

"Not with physical perpetuation—not at all," declared the Plutonian, whose lamp still showed an orange tint. "There are others whose place it is to attend to such menial duties. But we Neuters have everything to do with the mental perpetuation of the race. We are the transmitters of the arts and sciences, of poetry, music and philosophy. It is we who hand down everything that makes it worth while for the race to continue."

"Then you are a sort of superior caste?" I inquired. "An hereditary class—"

"No, not hereditary! We are Neuters mainly by our own choice. Birth has nothing to do with our high estate."

"Have No Fear!"

I AM afraid that Stark and I both wore the expression of a blank wall. We did not know whether to believe the speaker; we did not know what to reply; we could only assure him, in halting syllables, that no triple division of the sexes was known among our own people.

Perceiving that our words were spoken sincerely, the Plutonians expressed their surprise by means of orange flashes; and one of them, after a suitable interval, made bold to explain:

"Ages ago, before our people had learned how to cast off primitive restrictions, our race also had only two sexes. Every individual—the sages, the artists, the leaders of the State no less than the lowly—had then to take part in childbearing or rearing, and to waste many sequons under the proddings of passion or in the fruitless pursuit of love.

"But, even at the dawn of civilization, we were able to perceive how irrational all this was. Could not the physical needs of the race be served by the commonplace majority, leaving the distinguished few to pursue their studies without distraction? Long investigation and research had proved that genius or even exceptional talent was rarely inherited; and so we realized that there could be no racial loss were the individuals of ability to escape the slavery of the sexes.

"How to effect their release was of course the problem, and one that at first appeared insoluble; it was only after ten thousand sequons that the great Darevi, one of the most accomplished scientists known to history, devised a scheme whereby any male or female could voluntarily transform himself into a Neuter, diverting the sexual energy into channels conducive to the vast enlargement of the cranial cavity and accordingly of the brain.

"I shall not describe the means whereby the change was brought about, except to say that it operated through a transfusion of the glandular energy, and involved a series of minute and delicate surgical incisions resulting in pronounced organic changes. But the plan has worked beneficently for scores of thousands of sequons, and today any male or female who, upon approaching maturity, is adjudged to show sufficient promise, is privileged to under go necessary treatment and to pursue the consecrated career of a Neuter."

"You mean, then, that they must pursue that career?" inquired Stark. "Or merely that they may?"

"They may—there is no compulsion in the matter of a life-work. But it is considered an honor and an opportunity to be adjudged worthy of Neuterhood, and few are willing to let the chance go by. Of course, the chosen ones are allowed a little time—usually ten or twelve sequons—in which to make up their minds. But once the choice has been made, it is unalterable; the Neuter can never again become a male or female."

Following this explanation, a long silence fell, and it seemed that the meeting was about to break up. The lamp-heads were already picking up their notebooks, and several were rising

from their squatting positions on the mat-covered chests.

None the less, it occurred to Stark to put another query. "If you don't mind," he began, rather haltingly, and then paused as if not quite so sure of the proper expression to use, "if you don't mind, I wonder if you wouldn't tell me why so many of you Neuters go about without clothes?"

Lavender lights of amusement again appeared in all corners of the room, and there was a faint babbling of laughter.

"What a ridiculous question!" returned one of the lamp-heads. "Why should we need clothes? The air down here is warm; we will not freeze. And not being either males or females, we do not require garments for the sake of sexual allurement or concealment. Besides, are not the robes that nature gave us more handsome than anything we can make? It is true, here and there one does find a radical Neuter who prefers a man-made skin; but this usually occurs only with one who has some bodily defect to hide."

By this time most of the lamp-heads had gathered up their books, and some were already drifting out of the room. But that did not deter us from a final question: What was to be our lot after we had finished our education in the native language?

It seemed to Stark and me that there was a strange hesitation about the reply. Several minutes passed in silence, while the lamps of all our visitors grew dull and murky and burnt with a sooty flame. We were still too inexperienced to know what this might mean; but our suspicions were not relieved when one of our interviewers assured us:

"Have no fear, my friends. Wait and find out. Trust us—we are arranging everything for your own good. Have no fear at all."

"Have no fear at all!" echoed the others, while their lamps grew even duller of hue and threatened to go out. "No, no, you need have no fear at all."

I do not know why, but something in that repeated phrase aroused our alarm. I glanced at Stark in apprehension, and he glanced back at me with a perplexed and worried look; and then both of us, with unconcealed misgivings, let our eyes follow the Plutonians as the last of them vanished from the room. Their head-lamps, we noticed, were flickering and failing, and several were already quenched to a lifeless black.

CHAPTER XIV

Zandaye

WHATEVER Stark and I may have feared after our interview with the Plutonians, we found no justification during the weeks that followed. Our education continued, monotonously, uneventfully; gradually we were gaining skill in the native speech; gradually we were learning to read the native books, which, with their jagged script that reached down from the top of the page in the Chinese fashion, were the most difficult of all our problems to master.

But how well they repaid our efforts!—even the elementary text-books, designed for small children, offered information that made plain a thousand things. Thus we learned something about the Plutonian government, a democracy whose head was chosen by means of competitive examinations held every ten sequons among selected Neuters. We learned, at the same time, that there was only one government for the entire planet—and that it had ruled continuously, disturbed by no uprising, for more than a hundred thousand sequons.

More important still, we were enlightened regarding the scientific management of Pluto—for it was only by virtue of their scientific attainments that the Plutonians had survived for ages in their unnatural environment.

I shall not attempt to go into detail, particularly since I shall return to some phases of the subject later. I need only say that the secret of the success of the lamp-heads was to be found in radio-activity; they were fortunate enough to possess apparently inexhaustible supplies of the radio-active metals, and thanks to this abundant energy they heated the tremendous corridors and caverns that had been bored throughout the ages.

They converted the power of radium into electricity, and lighted their galleries by means of globes concealed just beneath the surface in order to avoid needless glare; they employed the radio-active forces to excavate the corridors and to empty the by-products of the excavations into enormous subterranean fissures (probably the vents of extinct volcanoes). But most important of all was the use of radium in industry, and in particular in the state-owned "oxygen industry"—for it was necessary for the Plutonians to disintegrate various oxides constantly if they would keep the underground atmosphere fresh and pure.

Correspondingly, it was important to relieve themselves of the used or polluted air; and this end they accomplished through gigantic pumps, which at stated intervals would discharge the foul air into the upper corridors by means of vents constructed long ago. Stark and I now realized that, shortly after our arrival upon the planet, it had been our misfortune to be caught in one of these vents just as the waste air was being pumped through; and this explained the sudden closing of the gates, which had entrapped us so unexpectedly.

Another question answered for us by the books was one which had puzzled us for weeks—that of the food supply. The chemistry of foods, we learned, had been studied on Pluto to an extent not remotely approached on the earth; the process had extended not only to analysis but to synthesis, and the great bulk of the planet's food supply was manufactured in the laboratory. Virtually all starches and sugars were produced under the influence of a strong sun-like illumination upon carbon and water; fats and oils were made by a more intricate process, whose formula I was never able to discover; while proteins alone remained beyond the power of scientists to imitate, and had to be extracted from plants grown in great caverns under the stimulation of a sort of artificial sunlight. Yet the flesh of animals—

the chief source of proteins on the earth—appeared to be unknown as an article of diet.

Since not more than five per cent of the planet's food came from vegetables, there was a natural deficiency in certain organic salts and acids. Hence these too were produced in the laboratory, and were consumed at each meal in the form of small white capsules—which explains the pills that the lamp-heads had urged us to swallow along with our first meal.

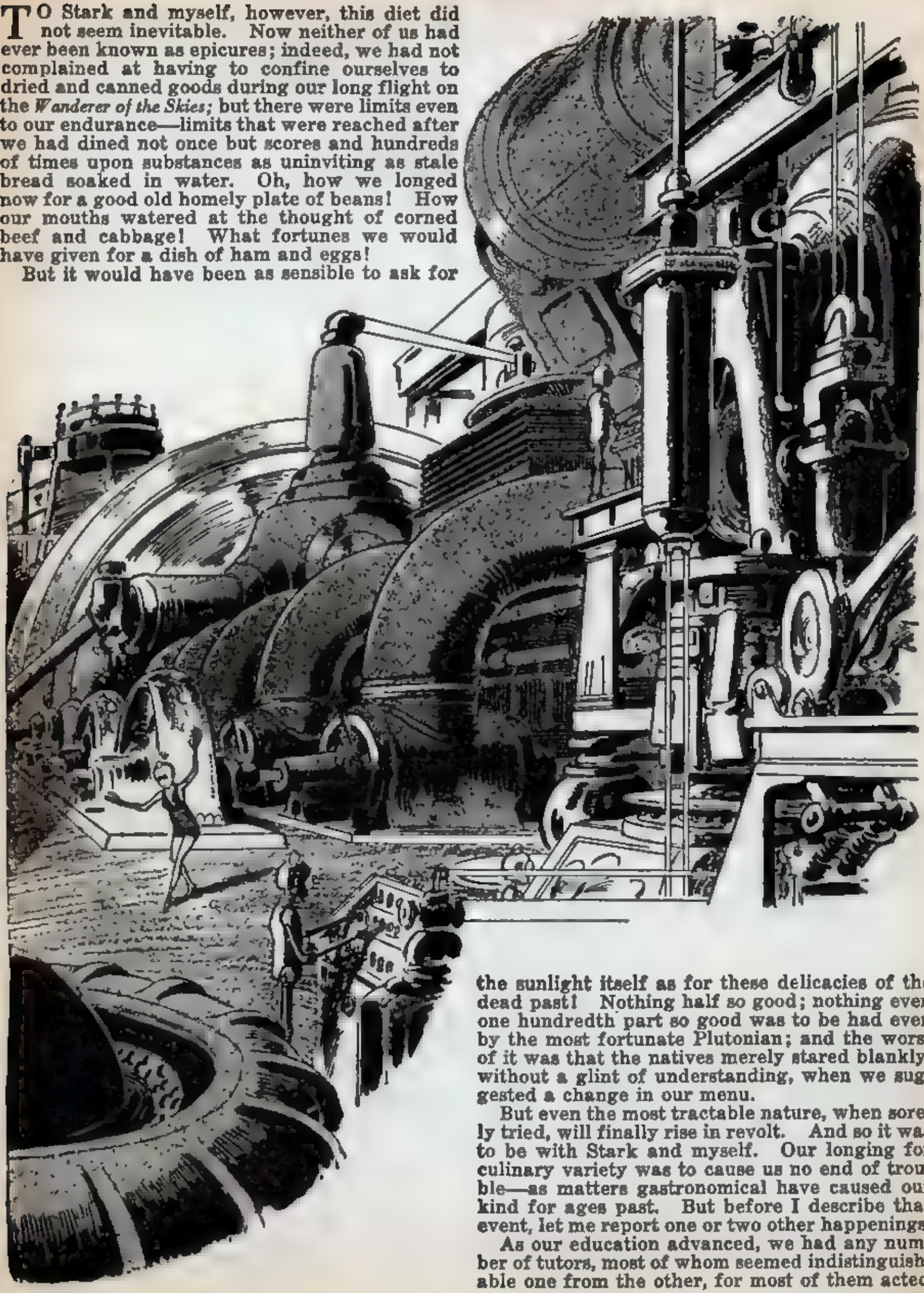
As for the various pasty, mush-like foods taken through tubes—we found that these were synthetic products which constituted the world-wide staple and were consumed day after day, year after year without change or variety by the five thousand million inhabitants of the planet.

The idea that food might be taken for pleasure was a notion that seems never to have penetrated the Plutonian intellect; the lamp-heads regarded eating from the most coldly practical point of view, as a necessary evil. They ate just as they breathed, only in order that they might not die, and expected no more enjoyment than from the circulation of their blood or the functioning of their kidneys. Hence nothing seemed more natural to them than to live upon capsules and mush.

A sharp snapping sound came to my ears, followed instantly by the most terrifying crash.

TO Stark and myself, however, this diet did not seem inevitable. Now neither of us had ever been known as epicures; indeed, we had not complained at having to confine ourselves to dried and canned goods during our long flight on the *Wanderer of the Skies;* but there were limits even to our endurance—limits that were reached after we had dined not once but scores and hundreds of times upon substances as uninviting as stale bread soaked in water. Oh, how we longed now for a good old homely plate of beans! How our mouths watered at the thought of corned beef and cabbage! What fortunes we would have given for a dish of ham and eggs!

But it would have been as sensible to ask for



the sunlight itself as for these delicacies of the dead past! Nothing half so good; nothing even one hundredth part so good was to be had even by the most fortunate Plutonian; and the worst of it was that the natives merely stared blankly, without a glint of understanding, when we suggested a change in our menu.

But even the most tractable nature, when sorely tried, will finally rise in revolt. And so it was to be with Stark and myself. Our longing for culinary variety was to cause us no end of trouble—as matters gastronomical have caused our kind for ages past. But before I describe that event, let me report one or two other happenings.

As our education advanced, we had any number of tutors, most of whom seemed indistinguishable one from the other, for most of them acted

as mechanically as though we were machines to be operated by means of switches and levers. But there was one who differed from all the rest. Shorter in build than most of her fellows, this individual (who went by the name of Zandaye) did not reach above the level of our shoulders, and at the same time was not nearly so slender as most Plutonians.

Her proportions—I say "her", since she timidly confessed to being neither a male nor a Neuter—were those of the most graceful, sylph-like woman; her eyes, which did not bulge like the eyes of her fellows, were not green but blue; her lips, likewise, were not green but red-tinged; so that altogether, had it not been for her head-lamp and her seven-fingered hands, we might almost have imagined her one of our own people.

Little did we realize at first how these advantages were regarded by her kin. For, when we congratulated her upon her form and the color of her eyes, she seemed almost ready for tears; her voice trembled, her head-lamp turned red, and she appeared to believe herself the butt of our jokes. It was only after long insistence that we learned the reason for her queer behavior: which was that she was regarded as a sort of freak; that her reddish lips were held to be unnatural; that her blue eyes were considered a mark of atavism, of degeneracy, since most of the lower animals on Pluto also had blue eyes; while her perfectly proportioned form was condemned as ludicrously obese.

We assured Zandaye that she did not seem monstrously heavy to us; but she went on to say that her weight—which, translated into our scale of measurements, would be about a hundred pounds—was about the normal maximum for her height. "However," she added—and now her face brightened, and her head-lamp took on the loveliest golden hue—"that does not keep me from advancing intellectually. Out of a class of more than a hundred last season, I was one of eleven judged worthy to become a Neuter."

"A Neuter?" I exclaimed, as much shocked as if she had said that she was to enter a nunnery. "Certainly, you are not going to let yourself be thrown away like that!"

"But, by my lamp, it is not to be thrown away!" she flashed back. "It is to be consecrated! To be sure, I still have a few sequons left to decide in—but, after all, what is there to decide? I will not be one of those who prefer a career of love—for who would ever love a misshapen creature like me?"

Seeing Zandaye standing before us with a piteous, forlorn expression in her great blue eyes, Stark and I were almost ready to forget her head-lamp and her fourteen long fingers. At least, I know that confession was trembling on my lips, and I fear that Stark was half ready to blot out the thought of a certain black-haired temptress several billions of miles away.

But although we did not let our emotions master us, our intimacy with Zandaye ripened rapidly during the succeeding days. She did not neglect her task of teaching us Plutonian; but she had become far more to us than a tutor; she was a friend as well, and would never hesitate to linger with us overtime and to exchange views on all manner of subjects. And so we came to look forward to our hours with her as the only bright spots in a gray monotony.

Yet it was because of her that Stark and I suffered the most serious misunderstandings of all our years of comradeship. It was because of the competition to shine in her eyes that we quarreled, and passed many long foolish hours together in a sulking silence. I shall not tell how dismal and forsaken I felt whenever she turned her smiles or her conversation upon him; or how moody and depressed he would grow whenever I appeared to be the favored party.

Let me not say that we were actually falling in love—for on earth, certainly, we would have thought twice before nursing sentimental feelings for a lady who wore a lamp instead of hair, and had two fingers too many on each hand. But since this was not the earth, she was assuredly the most eligible candidate for our starved affections.

Discovered!

AND could it be that Zandaye reciprocated our feelings? If she had not been regarded as freakish by her own people; if her blue eyes had not been laughed at, and her form—to our notions, the form of an elf—had not been mocked as grotesque, it is unlikely that she would have been attracted to individuals of our preposterously lampless build. But no doubt it was a novel experience to her to feel herself admired; and no doubt, being somewhat lonely, she found our conduct less uncouth than our hairy, large-mouthed faces might have led her to expect, and began to look forward to our meetings almost as eagerly as did we ourselves.

At all events, we noticed that her voice, in our almost daily meetings, had taken on a soft and musical quality which it had not possessed at first; while her head-lamp now and then would glow to an ethereal blue, whose meaning we were only able to divine.

But how little we could guess or imagine the strange future of our intimacy! Nothing could have been further from our anticipation than that sweep of events which for a while was to link our fates.

Let me now return to the most prosaic question of our food supply, which was becoming increasingly a worry as the days went by; and let me tell how our eagerness to satisfy our palates was productive of many evil fruits, of which Zandaye was to receive more than her share . . . .

One day, turning in disgust from one of our regular meals of synthetic mush, Stark and I left our portions half completed, while dolefully wondering if our weight would in time sink to the Plutonian standard. We were relieving our feelings by expressing disapproval of the planet in general, and by lamenting the absence of the art of cooking in particular, when we heard a slight rustling sound, and observed a small grayish creature that had slipped forward to prey upon our unfinished food.

Eight-legged, with beady eyes and head-lamp, it was of about the size of a rabbit, and, as we

well knew, was one of the numerous varieties of Plutonian domestic animals. "Suppose it would be good to eat?" I whispered to Stark, seized by a sudden idea; and he, with a wicked gleam in his eyes, muttered, "Wait! We'll find out," and, seizing a long steel rod, made an instant end of the creature.

While I had not been prepared for such precipitate action, I freely acknowledge an equal partnership in everything that followed. Clandestinely, like two criminals—as, indeed, we were to find that we were, according to Plutonian standards—we roasted our prey on the coils of an electric heater which automatically warmed our rooms, and which we managed to unbare with great difficulty. Then followed a banquet royal, in which we gorged upon the meat, which was tough and stringy but tasted more delicious to us than venison; and after everything was over and we had licked up the last morsel, we disposed of the remains as neatly as we could in one of the refuse boxes to be found in every corridor, and trusted to our good luck to keep the dead undiscovered.

Nor was it, apparently, detected; time went by, and no one mentioned the subject to us. And so, as our fears gradually subsided, we were emboldened to repeat the performance, and then to repeat it once more, and once more. Not until we had sacrificed half a dozen household pets did we see any reason to suppose we had acted unwisely.

Then, with the suddenness of a thundercrash, came disenchantment. One day, at an unexpected hour, Zandaye burst upon us in wide-mouthed excitement. Her blue eyes were almost staring out of her head; her fourteen long fingers were working all at once, in twenty different fluttering directions, her head-lamp shone with alternations of scarlet and yellow.

So agitated was she that at first she seemed unable to speak; she merely sank down into a seat, gasping and exhausted; she panted out a few words that we could not understand, and then for a moment was unable to reply to our bewildered questions.

"Friends—dear friends," she at length managed to say, while her head-lamp glowed to a duller hue and her eyes took on a less terrified expression, "I have come to warn you. I have just overheard a conversation—and one that does not bode well. It is about you."

"What—what is about us?" we both demanded.

A brief silence followed: then, with mournful eyes, Zandaye continued:

"FRIENDS, I was passing an open council door of the Committee of Neuters chosen to decide your case. Until today, you may know, there has been doubt as to what was to be done. But I, as one who wished you well, saw no reason to fear. Yet now, it seems, an unjust charge has been brought against you—oh, a charge which I will never, never believe! By my head-lamp! it is impossible that you, so kind and generous, could have fallen as your accusers say. It is claimed that you have killed animals—in order to eat them!"

Stark and I attempted no reply. We merely stared guiltily at one another; while Zandaye, not catching the expression in our eyes, hastily proceeded:

"It must be some enemy of yours who claims that the skin and bones of the victim were found in the refuse boxes in your corridor. How can they believe you would commit such a disgusting deed? Why would you, when you already had food enough? And anyhow, what an idea!—to eat dead animals! Well, it seems nevertheless that this foolish charge is being considered by the Committee of Neuters, and is urged as the excuse to perform an experiment which some of them have already been recommending."

"Experiment? What experiment?" we gasped, remembering how murky and dark the lights of the Neuters had become at the close of our recent interview.

Zandaye hesitated, but still wore a frightened expression as she resumed, "They say that it is an experiment which will benefit you—if you survive. They have been wondering about your lack of head-lamps, without which, they claim, you are not fit for civilized life. Now they are urging that you show vicious traits—such as the desire to kill and eat animals—simply because so many things are dark for you and you have no lamps.

"And so one of our famous surgeons, who is a member of the Committee, is asking his fellows to give him the right to perform some operations in order to restore your light. He says he believes that, by removing the lower half of each of your heads—"

"The lower half of our heads?" we both interrupted, in one voice.

"So, by my mother's head-lamp, he says! He will then, he reports, be able to stimulate a certain gland, which regulates the growth of head-lamps, and which he thinks to be atrophied in both your cases. By this means, after replacing the removed parts of your skulls—"

"By heavens," I exclaimed, "we will both be dead by that time!"

"Not at all," she declared, trying to smile. "Not if the operation is a success."

"But how could it succeed?" I raged. "It's impossible!"

"Impossible!" concurred Stark. "Insane!"

From her melancholy expression, it was clear that Zandaye agreed with us.

"But tell me," I demanded, "certainly, certainly this wild scheme hasn't been approved?"

"Yes, that's what made me so excited," she confessed, with drooping head and despondent eyes. "It was approved by the Committee of Neuters—just as I slipped away."

CHAPTER XV

Flight!

HAD we taken days to ponder our course, we could not have reached any other decision than came to us in our first minute after Zandaye's revelation.

"See here, Dan!" muttered Stark, lapsing into English in his excitement. "There's only one

thing to do. We've got to get out of this hole —and get out fast!"

"The less time wasted the better!" I cried, in a voice that trembled.

"What is that you are saying, friends?" inquired Zandaye, annoyed that we were speaking in a foreign tongue.

"We were saying," I informed her, in a broken Plutonian, "that we've spent time enough here. We've got to go—get away—escape!"

"Get away? Escape?" she echoed, while her head-lamp registered a yellow-green flare of dismay. "But how? When? Where to?"

"Right now! Any way we can! Where I don't know!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, yes, you do know! You must know!" insisted Stark. "There's only one place! We must get back to the surface—regain our car—and fly away from this accursed world!"

"Oh, if we only could!" I sighed.

"But my friends, you would not leave me?" shrilled Zandaye. "By my seven fingers, you would not go where I could never see you again?"

"We would not want to—not if we could help it!" I swore.

"We would do anything sooner than stay here to be vivisected!" raged Stark.

"But think, my friends, the Committee of Neuters may yet change its mind!"

"While we still have ours, we won't wait for that!" I growled.

And with this sentiment Stark registered complete sympathy.

"But how do you expect to escape?" inquired Zandaye, whose head-lamp seemed to be ranging through all the colors of the rainbow. "We are deep, deep down in the ground, do you not realize that? Do you not know how far it is, in a straight line, to the highest corridor?"

I did not know, but asserted that we would cover the distance no matter how far it was.

"Well, it is over thirty cerxes," she stated.

Stark and I performed a rapid mental calculation. "Fifty miles!" he computed, with a grim smile. "More than fifty miles underground!"

"Nearly ten times the height of Mount Everest!" I groaned.

We had not suspected that we were so far beneath the surface, and the information made us feel as if the weight of the entire planet were bearing upon our shoulders.

"Well, no matter, it will have to be done," decided Stark, gritting his teeth. "It's our only chance." And then, turning to Zandaye, "Will you—will you be our guide?"

Zandaye hesitated. Her head-lamp flickered, and turned from a faint blue to the yellow of fear. "My friends," she assured us, in words that wavered and almost broke, "my friends, for you I would do anything at all. But, by my father's lamp! it is a horrible risk! There are grave penalties—if we should be caught. Perhaps graver penalties for me than for you. But we must not be caught. Yes, I will take the chance —for your sake!"

Once more the blue light returned to Zandaye's head-lamp; while her great eyes shone with an expression of mingled benignity and resignation.

However, we could not let her sacrifice herself for our sake.

"No, Zandaye," I dissuaded—and I saw that Stark had already opened his mouth for a similar request, "no, after all, you must not. You must not take the risk. We will not permit it."

"You must permit it!" All at once the uncertainty had disappeared from her tone; there was the firmness of utter assurance. "You must permit it! How will you be able to find your way without me? How thread your path upward through the long mazes? Why, you have not even head-lamps to guide you. How long, do you suppose, before your feet would be entangled in the meshes your clever pursuers spread for you?"

Stark and I were silent; all too vividly we remembered our recent experiences with the spidery webs in the dark.

"No, friends," she continued, "your only hope is to let me show the way. I have often traveled to the upper galleries; I know all the byways, the side corridors. I will take you where your pursuers would not think of coming. Do you not trust me?"

WE were quick to assure her of our confidence.

"Then, by my right of Neuterhood!" was her ultimatum, "you must accept me as your guide! Otherwise, I shall not soon forgive the affront."

As it was far from our desire to affront Zandaye, we let her know that her services were gratefully accepted.

But there were still many questions that tantalized and oppressed us. "How can we escape even from our own corridor?" I asked. "I have seen guards watching at the main entrance—and, even if there were no guards, we would be recognized and caught very soon—"

"Have no fear!" she counselled. "Do you think I would lead you to the main entrance? Sacred head-lamps, but that would be too foolish! I know a small side-passage which is rarely used and where there are no guards, because no one would expect you to find it. Besides—" here Zandaye hesitated again, and assumed a meditative expression—"besides, I think you should disguise yourselves.

"Not by all the powers that see in darkness! you can never be disguised from any one that looks at you closely! But you may not be noticed at a distance. First of all, you should cut off all that brown fuzzy weed on your heads and faces."

Stark and I both groaned. Still, when the choice was between our hair and our heads, there was little room for doubt.

"Bring on the scissors!" we conceded, begrudgingly. And Zandaye slipped out of the room, and in a few minutes returned with a long scimitar-like blade of inconceivable sharpness.

Now began an ordeal—truly, an ordeal I should never care to repeat. Any one who has tried to shave with a sword-blade will appreciate how we felt when Zandaye wielded her terrible implement. All in all, when I look back upon that shearing, I feel lucky that we suffered only minor injuries.

It is true that I cursed and grumbled sufficiently when Zandaye, evidently poorly acquainted

with our earthly anatomy, took off the tip of my chin along with my beard; while never have I heard a man howl more belligerently than did poor Stark at the loss of an upper segment of his right ear. Worst of all, Zandaye was frightened almost to death at the sight of our blood, which, as she observed to her consternation, was of a deep red hue; whereas on Pluto, she assured us, only the blood of animals was red, while that of human beings was of the purest blue. I am afraid that she had a passing fear that, after all, we were not human.

Nevertheless, she was tenderly solicitous in treating our wounds . . . until finally, after an harassing hour, Stark and I stood completely shorn. Only a bare trace of stubble now remained upon our blood-smeared faces; while our denuded scalps showed but the baldest indication of ever having borne hair.

"Now that's better," commented Zandaye, observing her handiwork critically, while she slipped the instrument of destruction back into its scabbard. "Yes, by the lamps of my ancestors, much better! How much more handsome you do look!"

Stark and I, catching a glimpse of our shining pates in a hand-mirror passed to us by Zandaye, thought that we looked like convicted criminals. Hence we could only smile grimly when our helper suggested, "I believe you should really go about like that all the time. It's so much more becoming! So much more man-like!"

"There's nothing else we need cut off, is there?" asked Stark, with just a tinge of sarcasm. "Our hands or our noses aren't too long, are they?"

"Well, your mouths are much too big," she mused, regarding us with an appraising glance. "Then, also, your fingers are so short, and so very few! But let the eyes of all Neuters be my witness! we can't overcome your natural handicaps. Your faces, to be sure, might be made a little whiter and more pasty of complexion—but that we may yet remedy. The most important thing to remember is about your lamps. I really must do something about that. Since you can't have the genuine kind, I must give you imitation lamps. . . Wait for me just a minute."

Before we could imagine what she was about, Zandaye had slipped from the room again. Not one minute but many went by before she had returned; and meanwhile Stark and I did our best to soothe our still-aching wounds. We knew that Zandaye's intentions were of the best, yet we wondered what new ordeal was in store, and accordingly were reassured when she returned with nothing more formidable-looking than two crystal globes.

"Here," she informed us, in tones of ringing satisfaction, "are some artificial head-lamps. They are the kind used by those of our people so unfortunate as to lose their natural lamps by accident. Of course, such crystals give no light of their own, and are worn only for the sake of appearances. But, at a distance, they may sometimes pass for the real thing."

THEREUPON, to our intense disgust, Stark and I were both equipped with the head-lamps. Let it not be supposed that the process was in any way pleasant; we had first to have some heavy glue smeared over our scalps; and by this means the crystal balls, which must have weighed three or four pounds each, were fastened so tightly that one might have thought they had grown there. It was long before I could accustom myself to the burden, and it is no wonder that my neck involuntarily drooped; while Stark, whose neck likewise hung, looked as freakish as a circus performer with the great gleaming transparent ball staring just above his hairless forehead.

But Zandaye was well pleased with the results. Such was her enthusiasm that she leapt up and down for sheer joy, and clapped her long hands together uproariously, until we feared that the noise would bring some passing Neuter to investigate.

"Now at last," she exclaimed, "you look like real men! Yes, by the lights of all my family! just like real men! Oh, my friends, you ought to have done this long before! You ought always to wear head-lamps! You can't imagine what an improvement it makes in your appearance!"

Stark and I grunted, and then consented to having Zandaye put the final touches upon us by rubbing a chalky powder over our lips and faces—as a result of which we looked like walking ghosts.

Now that our make-up was complete, all that remained was to escape. And since Zandaye warned us that any delay would be dangerous, it was only a few minutes before Stark and I had joined her on the way to one of those obscure, little-used galleries which, she declared, might eventually lead us to safety.

CHAPTER XVI

The Disappearance

UNTIL the moment of that memorable flight with Zandaye, Stark and I had had no suspicion of the number and intricacy of the galleries that threaded the Plutonian underworld. Hitherto we had traveled mainly in the broad, central corridors, which corresponded to the leading streets of a city; now we were to wander through labyrinthine byways that were like the back-lanes and alleys pursued by criminals. To give more than the vaguest idea of the maze of passageways would be impossible, since my very memory stands bewildered at the thought.

I recall only that we glided through trap-doors and half visible openings in the walls; that we slunk through dark, grimy spaces reminding me of coal-cellars; that we felt for our way in the winding recesses of tunnels barely wide enough to permit our passage; that we climbed interminable flights of stairs, and crawled up spiral ascents so steep that we had to progress on all fours. Most of the hollows were of a pitchy, unutterable blackness; and only the radiance of Zandaye's head-lamp, which shone and glittered like a miniature sun, permitted us to find our awy.

Before we had been gone half an our, accordingly, I began to wonder as to our wisdom in

fleeing with Zandaye—suppose that she were to lose her way? or, worse still, suppose that we lost touch with her, and were entombed here forever? But, even in the absence of such catastrophes, how long would it take us to climb fifty miles to safety?

Yet all my fears, when put into words, only caused Zandaye's lamp to glow to a lavender of amusement. "By the light of my head! do you imagine I have not thought of all that?" she demanded. "It may cost us a day or two to get out, but we will not starve; I have brought some food with me. Besides, I know of a pneumatic tube that will shoot us three quarters of the way upwards in less time than it takes to eat a meal."

Stark and I did not inquire into the details of the pneumatic tube, although we were told that it operated by means of compressed air. We could not speak much as we continued on our way, each within hand's grasp of the others; our minds were sufficiently occupied merely in order to avoid the pitfalls of the darkness, to make sure that no tell-tale sound would betray us, and that the voice of no pursuer was muttering in the gloom behind. Amid the bewilderment of those crazy passageways, it was of course inevitable that some minor accidents should befall; and it is therefore not surprising that Stark should have bruised his knee against some concealed obstacle and ripped his already bursting Plutonian costume till one leg was half exposed; and much less is it surprising that, in bending low to pass through a barely visible doorway, I should have forgotten about my lamp, of which I was reminded by a sudden loud shattering sound, and by a shock that went through my entire spinal column.

"Cracked! May the Neuters preserve us! your lamp is cracked!" I remember Zandaye exclaiming, mournfully, as she cast her illumination upon me. "Split right down the center! And we can't stop to fix it! Lucky it's made of specially tempered crystal; otherwise, it would have burst to bits!"

I did not tell her that I wished it had burst to bits, since the weight was making my neck and shoulders ache unmercifully.

But we said no more about the matter, and continued on our way in silence. Though the air of the galleries was musty and stagnant, and unbearably foul to our nostrils; though the darkness grew increasingly oppressive as the minutes wore into hours, and our fingers became sore from fumbling at the jagged rock-walls; though a great weariness overcame our muscles and our hearts panted warningly as we attempted the difficult ascents, still we felt that we had one great cause for thanksgiving—nowhere had we seen the sign of any foe, nowhere had we heard a suspicious footstep or beheld a suspicious light. Could it be that we had eluded pursuit? that we were actually to escape?

"We are following galleries that are seldom used," confided Zandaye, on one of those rare occasions when she let her voice rise above a whisper. "Most of them were built ages ago, before any of the modern thoroughfares. Some of them have been abandoned, and the others mostly lead to the storage vaults and the industrial plants, to which they are a sort of back-entrance. Every one of our people, however, is required to know all about them, in case of emergency—"

With disconcerting abruptness, Zandaye stopped short. Her head-lamp had lost its sun-white glitter; a faint tinge of yellow was overspreading it.

"Yes, what in case of emergency?" I demanded. And then suddenly I remembered what a yellow light signified.

"In case of emergency—" she repeated, and once more fell into silence.

THE yellow of her head-lamp was growing more pronounced; in a moment, it had burned to a brilliant saffron.

"What is it, Zandaye? What—what is it?" we gasped, rigid with dread. But still her lamp remained vividly saffron, and she stood stock-still and speechless.

Probably her senses were keener than ours; were able to detect things that we missed. For it was at least a minute—a minute of lingering tenseless and staring-eyed suspense—before we observed, far, far beneath us, a sight that made us groan and shudder. Whole universes away it seemed, lost amid the profound blackness of the long, sloping corridor—but was it not unmistakable, that firefly flutter of a light? Was it not the head-lamp of an advancing enemy?

"Come! Quick! Quick! We must fly!" Zandaye burst forth, while her head-lamp gave a series of yellow flashes. "Quick! Waste no time!"

Hardly could one imagine a madder flight than our ensuing dash through the dark. Zandaye went first, her flickering lamp our guide, her footsteps swifter than ours to traverse the uncertain gloom; while behind her Stark and I panted as best we could, our hearts thumping fiercely as we scrambled up step after sharp-edged stone step. Still far to our rear, but growing closer, closer, glimmered that firefly light in the dark; and now all at once there was not one light, but three, four, half a dozen!

How strangely, how fantastically rapid appeared their flight as they rose through the vacant spaces beneath us! At times they would vanish behind some turn in the gallery; then, like torches in a nightmare, they would reappear, nearer, more brilliant than before; and always their numbers appeared to be growing, growing! What chance to escape those relentless demon-fires?

At last the distance between us seemed to have dwindled to a few hundred yards. The lamp-bearers were advancing by great sweeps and curves, almost as if leaping through the air; they seemed to be making five steps to our one; already we could imagine we saw the baleful glitter of their greenish eyes. Then, just as we were about to sink down in surrender; just as we expected to feel the irresistible seven-fingered hands clutching at our arms, we reached a turn in the corridor, and Zandaye, with inconceivable swiftness, flung open a little barely visible door.

She darted through; I crept through after her; my eyes caught a vision of fearful lights leaping

within hand's grasp; then came the clattering of the door upon its hinges—and darkness!

"Follow me!" my guide whispered into my ear. "They will not find us now!"

But as I crawled after her through a tunnel just large enough to permit my passage on hands and knees, a staggering thought came to me. Where was the third member of our party? Now for the first time, as my panic began to subside, I noticed that no Stark was at my side—no Stark was to be seen by the wavering light of Zandaye's head-lamp!

"Andrew! Andrew!" I cried in terror. But the rumbling cavern echoes were my only reply. "Andrew! Andrew!" I shrieked again, in growing dread. "Andrew! Andrew!" But there was no response except from Zandaye, who, turning sharply about, put up a warning hand. "Not so loud! Not so loud! If they hear you, we will be caught too!"

Then, coming close to me, she whispered a sorrowful confession. "He is gone! We have lost him! I had to do it! He was too far behind! I had to close the door—or we would have been caught! By my lamp! How could I help myself? I had to!"

"You had to?" I groaned. "Then Andrew is caught!" And, at that thought, I fear that the tears rolled down my cheeks to match those already in Zandaye's eyes.

"But no, no! It cannot be! He cannot be caught!" I cried, with insane desperation. "We must go back to him! We must save him!"

Such was my fury and grief that there was no restraining me. Though Zandaye protested that the attempt was madness; that I was throwing my freedom away all for nothing, I insisted on creeping back through the narrow tunnel on hands and knees; insisted that the door of our escape be flung open once more; insisted on scrambling out into the large passageway where we had beheld the pursuing lights.

"Andrew!" I cried, hoarsely. "Andrew! Andrew! Where are you? Where are you?"

But the rocky walls flung back that cry as if in mockery. And in all that hollow blackness there was no other answer. The dreaded lights had vanished, and with them Stark had disappeared as if the earth had swallowed him.

CHAPTER XVII

Among the Iron Cyclops

IT was long before Zandaye could persuade me to leave that desolate spot and give a thought to my own safety. I moped through the gloom like a man demented; I scarcely cared how I bruised my hands and knees against the rock; I cried out again and again the name of Stark, to be answered only by the sneering echoes and the silence.

"Come away! Come away, my friend! They will surely return! They will hear you! They will catch you!" cried Zandaye, whose head-lamp blazed with a terrorized yellow. "You cannot help him now! By the love of all Neuters! you must save yourself! What gain for him if they catch you?"

"What gain for me to escape if he is caught?" I groaned. "What will be the use? I do not want to get away without him! He has been my companion in all my adventures! I would not go back to earth without him!"

"Take courage, my friend, you both will yet escape," predicted Zandaye. But her words were uttered in the manner of one who speaks of a hope in which she does not believe.

Then once more the heavy silence of those eerie depths fell upon us. I was as if paralyzed; I did not know which way to turn, I did not care which way I turned; it seemed useless to seek or strive now that Stark was no longer with us.

Had it not been for Zandaye, I might have gone fumbling back through the darkness; fumbling crazily back in search of Stark, to fall into the hands of my enemies without benefiting my friend. But Zandaye managed to dissuade me. Even in this moment of despair, she exerted a strange influence; I felt her presence like a solace, like a caressing warmth; I seemed to know that her sympathy was quivering through the darkness; and her will, her desire for my safety, was in some inscrutable way a moving force.

"Come, we must go!" she seemed to be saying to me, even when no words came from her lips; and her long, soft fingers, reaching for mine through the gloom and intertwining with them, sent a tremor through my veins even amid my grief, and acted upon me like a command.

And so I had no longer any will, any power of my own. Where she led, I followed; followed unquestioningly, slavishly, like an infant guided by its mother's hand. With one last disconsolate glance back into the black abysses where Stark had vanished, I retreated with her back into the narrow byway, and for a second time heard her slam the iron door, while the two of us, like conspirators, crawled on all fours through the remote, tunneled depths.

"Where are you leading me, Zandaye?" I felt like asking. "What is to be the end of all this? How can the two of us, together in the darkness, expect to reach safety?"

But I did not put these thoughts into words. My mind was still benumbed; my will was not my own. A strange magnetic power still seemed to vibrate from Zandaye, drawing me on as if to some foreordained destiny. And so for many minutes, with her long fingers wound about mine and her blue-white head-lamp serving as our only guide, we crept through that narrow tunnel. That we were bound for some known destination appeared certain enough; yet, as we crawled and crawled on our way, with cramped muscles and aching heads, it seemed to me that this dreary pit had no outlet, that we would labor never-endingly through the darkness, that perhaps at last we would be sealed up here like rats in a trap.

I can hardly describe the extremity of my relief when at length a dim illumination became visible ahead of us. "There! There! I knew we were getting there!" Zandaye exclaimed; and, without another word, she hastened her pace, while every instant the light grew more pronounced. She did not seem to hear my repeated, "Where are we going? Where are we going, Zandaye?"; her head-lamp only sparkled

more vividly, and she did not reply. . . until all at once, while wonder contended within me with fear, we rounded a turn in the gallery; my nostrils drew in deep draughts of fresh, life-giving air; and we came face to face with one of the most astonishing scenes I had yet beheld even on this planet of marvels.

So extraordinary was the spectacle that I stopped short like one who, winding through some narrow defile among the mountains, suddenly comes out upon a panorama of far-flung ranges, forest, valleys, and lakes. My lips opened in an involuntary gasp; my startled eyes were ready to stare from their sockets. Spread out beneath me was a cavern of Titanic proportions; like the one I had already seen, it was at least five hundred feet high and a thousand feet across at its narrowest part, while its walls glowed with radiance from some invisible source. But, in all other respects, how unlike anything we had seen before! Stretching ahead of us as far as the eyes could reach, and extending from the floor to the vaulting ceiling, were machines, and machines, and more machines!

AND what machines! what profusion and variety and intricacy of operation! Uncannily noiseless, wheels as tall as ten-story buildings rotated with a slow, deliberate motion; mile-long chains revolved with only a low, rattling sound; levers longer than the masts of ships bent in and out, in and out with a frictionless efficiency; tubes and pipes as thick as the trunks of giant redwood were twisted and coiled like the entrails of monstrous beasts; wire wound in and out in a meshwork as of some colossal's spider's web, and springs as long as a ten-car railroad train were compressed and released with an automatic, mathematical regularity suggestive of incalculable power.

Yet these sights, bewildering as they were, were not the most surprising features of the cavern. Placed at intervals among the wheels, springs and levers, I observed multitudes of what I at first mistook for Plutonian laborers. Each had a head dominated by a glaring light; each was slender of form and from six to eight feet tall and had long thin legs and seven-fingered hands, which flexed and unflexed with amazing rapidity, performing mechanical operations with more precision and dexterity than any man I had ever seen.

Only after peering at them closely; only after observing that their movements were too orderly and perfect for mere flesh and blood, did I conclude that they were not living things at all, but cleverly constructed automatons!

"Where—where under the sun can we be?" I muttered to myself, in English; while my gaping eyes stared hungrily across that incredible scene. And Zandaye, hearing me and gazing at me curiously, bade me repeat the question in Plutonian; after which she attempted to explain:

"I thought you would have guessed what this is. The world's chief ventilation factory."

"Ventilation factory?" I demanded. "What do you mean? The place where they manufacture oxygen?"

"Not at all. That is far away. In this cavern, by means of engines which you can't see even the hundredth part of, we start the planet's air in circulation, forcing a breeze down all the chief corridors. Were it not for this factory, the air everywhere would become stagnant, and after a few days life would be impossible."

"Heavens!" I gasped, whistling in my astonishment. "I wouldn't have guessed it was that important!" And then, as the thought of my vanished friend suggested itself to me, I was shaken with fresh grief, and murmured, "I do wish Stark could have seen this! Wouldn't he have been interested! . . . By the way, what are those man-like machines with the moving arms and legs?"

Zandaye glanced at me in surprise; her glittering eyes reproached me for asking the self-evident. "Why, you silly lampless thing! they are our workers, of course. The iron men employed in all industries for the last fifty thousand sequons."

"Fifty thousand sequons?" I echoed; whereupon Zandaye, realizing the extent of my ignorance, tolerantly went on to explain:

"None of the world's factories employ actual human beings any more, except as managers and inspectors. Why should they, when men of iron can perform the work so much more swiftly and efficiently? Iron men, you see, never tire; they never complain; they do not object to long hours; they do not go on strike; they do not disobey instructions; they are not known to meddle or blunder. All in all, it is estimated that one mechanical man is worth a hundred men of flesh and blood. And the men of flesh and blood, for their own part, have no reason to complain, since they are released for the more useful, less slavelike work. . . Now let's be getting along into the factory."

"Just one minute, Zandaye!" I begged, glancing apprehensively toward that vibrating wilderness of machinery. "Really, it doesn't look very safe to me out there. Don't you think we're likely to be seen—"

There was a laughing decisiveness in her voice as she cut me short. "Seen? By my head-light! who is there to see us? Surely, the iron men won't notice. No, my friend, this is the one place where we're least likely to be observed, for no one ever comes here except to inspect or repair the machines—which doesn't happen once a sequon, since they are controlled automatically from above. We shall be able to find some recess where we're absolutely safe to talk over our plans. Come, my friend—don't hesitate."

"I'm not hesitating," I replied, with renewed courage; and for a while we spoke no more as we silently made our way amid the monster machines.

We saw the tremendous wheels rotating and whirling above our heads and to all sides; the huge jointed rods, like the limbs of iron Cyclops, opened and withdrew with a precision beautiful to watch; bellows-like globes, bigger than balloons, were distended and deflated with a swiftness that the eye could hardly follow; screws as large as railroad ties revolved in iron sockets, steel belts twisted and bent about us, electric coils gave out sparks and flashes like the signals

of a wireless system. And all the while, secure from contact with the great machines, we followed a little twisted trail of stone that wound in and out amid the metallic masses like a well-cleared path through a jungle.

HAD we clung to that trail, everything would have gone smoothly. But apparently it had not occurred to Zandaye to warn me—otherwise, catastrophe would have been averted. Yet can I really be blamed for stepping aside?—can I really be blamed, when the object of attraction was something unparalleled in my experience? Picture a shining crystal ball about ten feet in height; picture its face like a mirror, in which are reflected all the multitudinous activities of the whole vast cavern: the speeding of the wheels, the turns and twisting of the vast chains and belts, the flexing and unflexing of the muscles of all the innumerable iron men. "Can it be that I am dreaming?" I asked myself. "Am I only imagining all this?" And with these questions in mind, I stepped forward impulsively to examine the crystal.

So rapidly, so heedlessly did I act that Zandaye's terrified "Look out! Look out!" came too late. I did not see the meshes of fine wire on the cavern floor; I did not see the long steel rod that reached ahead on a level with my ankles. All that I realized was that my feet, in their head-long dash, struck some unseen obstacle; that I lost my balance, and pitched precipitately to the floor; that a sharp snapping sound came to my ears, followed almost instantly by the most terrific crash I had ever heard. . .

Down the aisle walked a resplendent large-headed figure clad only in the light shed by his sun-brilliant lamp.

(Illustration by Paul)

With a detonation as of thunder still resounding in my ears, I picked myself up, stunned, bewildered, but unhurt.

"May the Neuters have mercy on us!" wailed Zandaye. "May they have mercy for what you have done!" But not for several seconds, in my confusion and fright, did I notice the change

that had come over the cavern. And then, when I did notice, I was scarcely able to believe. Where all had been movement and activity only a minute before, all was now lifeless and dead. The machinery had come to a standstill! Not one wheel turned, not one belt or chain revolved, not one lever twisted, not one iron man stirred a limb in all that enormous gallery!

With hands fluttering with fright, Zandaye stood open-mouthed before me. Her large eyes were bulging to double their usual size; she was uttering something that I took to be an oath or a curse, though I could not make out the words.

Trembling like her, and with eyes also dilated, I stared at her in speechless confusion. And then slowly, mercilessly, in deliberate, incisive accents, like the tones of fate itself, her words were borne to me, "You have done an unthinkable thing! An unthinkable thing, my friend! You have switched off the power! You have turned off the ventilation supply! The whole world will be without air now! By the lamp of the Head Neuter himself! the whole world will be without air!"

Her words ended in a gasp that was like a moan, and her head-lamp glowed with an alternate yellow and red; while I, gaping at her still half in a daze, was only beginning to realize the enormity of what I had done, was only beginning to understand that we had stumbled into difficulties compared with which our former woes would seem of no account.

CHAPTER XVIII

A Bit of Crystal

LIKE creatures who realize too late that they have walked into a trap, Zandaye and I gave way to panic as our minds began to grasp the strangeness and peril of our plight. We were filled suddenly with the stampeding animal's wild desire to escape; we had no thought but to flee from this gallery, where the great motionless machines everywhere stared down on us as if in mockery.

"Hurry!" whispered Zandaye; and the very murmuring of her voice sounded ominously loud. Then, hardly taking time to be sure that I was at her heels, she set off at a sprint down the winding stone walk among the monstrous machines. I had difficulty in keeping up with her, for at every turn I was in danger of colliding with some outstretched rod or some barely visible pipe or wire; indeed, so impetuous was my pace that I could not avoid one mishap, when I came face to face with a wall with such speed that my head-lamp gave a crash as of a hammer stroke and I saw a crystal fragment clattering to the floor.

Stunned from the shock, I picked myself up hurriedly and was about to dash after Zandaye when an unexpected, familiar noise came to me with a flash of fear. It was still faint and remote, but how well I recognized the thick-voiced speech of the lamp-heads!

Zandaye, too, had evidently heard the sound, for she came darting back to me, her head-lamp a glaring yellow. "The Neuters preserve us!" she muttered. "We are too late! They have come already! Quick! A hiding-place!'

"But where? Where?" I flung back. And my eyes, searching the desert of wheels and coils, could find no likely-looking place.

Zandaye meanwhile stood staring out across that same wasteland, and not a word came to her quivering lips.

At the same time, at intervals, we heard the heavy-toned voices in the distance; and gradually they seemed to be growing nearer.

"Here!" exclaimed my companion, with startling suddenness, just as I was about to own myself baffled. "Come here! Over here they won't find us!"

Slipping down on all fours, she cleared a path amid a tangle of wires toward a great boiler-like iron device a few yards away. I followed her as best I could; but, being broader-limbed and not nearly so agile, I could pass through the wire barricade only after much scratching and tearing, which marked my face and hands with bloody lines and put many a fresh rent in my long-suffering clothes.

Yet I had the best of inducements to make haste. The voices had burst forth again, in excited tones; and new voices were to be heard from all sides of us. And was that not a searching head-lamp which flashed for an instant through a distant gap among the machines?

Reaching the boiler-like contrivance, Zandaye seized a small, barely visible knob and drew open a door leading to a yawning black hollow. Though I was still not within hand's grasp, she slipped through the opening, and stood frantically gesturing; and when I came up, bruised and panting, she flung forth seven clutching fingers to hasten my entrance. In a moment, I had joined her, and the iron lid had come rattling down.

The interior was not completely dark, for there was Zandaye's head-lamp to illuminate it; and, besides, there were a number of air-holes, hardly large enough to see through, though sufficient to admit a small amount of light. Our new quarters, however, were none too commodious; Zandaye and I had barely room to crouch side by side on the iron floor; while if I lifted my head I would be in danger of striking the ceiling, and if either of us moved sideways we would be stopped by the wall.

But our haven, such as it was, had come as a friend in need, for it seemed unlikely that the lamp-heads would find us here.

Yet we had not reached the retreat any too soon. Within a few minutes, we heard the voices of party after passing party of Plutonians, as they moved in great agitation along the stone aisles all about us. At first, though we strained our ears, we could not make out what they were saying; yet it was manifest that they were bewildered, alarmed, and angry.

We could hear an occasional metallic grating and clattering, as of the manipulation of tools; we could hear an occasional explosive exclamation that sounded like an oath or a command; we could hear the excitement of the passers-by growing from minute to minute, and realized that their numbers were increasing. But we knew nothing more definite until eventually a group

of them paused to confer at a distance of only a few yards.

"BY the head-light of my father's father!" one of them was saying. "It's the strangest thing in my experience! Such a complete tie-up hasn't been known for a thousand sequons!"

"And we don't seem able to trace its source!" some one else returned, with a groan. "It's just as if some stupid beast had interfered."

"Blessed Neuters, isn't that what did happen once?" demanded a third. "You remember reading of the great tie-up of the Sequon 503, 181, in which the world was without ventilation for three days, and two million persons perished? Now what did they finally find the cause to be? Nothing but some little household pet, smaller than a man's hand, which had strayed from here and got entangled in the machinery."

"Yes, by my fourteen fingers, but today the gallery is beast-proof!" another voice dolefully added; after which, for a while, there was silence.

"It will be bad for us all at the final investigation," the first speaker sorrowfully resumed. "The Head Neuter will send a committee, and some one will be demoted to the Frigid Corridors. The Head Neuter is particularly severe about such things. He always was a fanatic on efficiency."

"But by the glory of his lamp! there's nothing to be done about it now!" came the mournful response. "By this time the whole world has noticed the lack of breezes. Why, already, before we came down here, radio messages were coming from a hundred stations complaining about the air supply. Mothers with babies were frantic, since it's said the lack of a draft kills the very young."

A long-drawn sigh followed by a curse was the only answer; then ensued another silence, and it seemed to us that the party was withdrawing. But suddenly, as Zandaye and I whispered to one another that they were gone, there came an excited whoop, and half a dozen voices began to gibber all at once.

"By my lamp! look at this!" some one was exclaiming, in astonishment mixed with jubilation. "Just look at this! If this isn't a clue! A little broken piece of crystal! Where did it come from? It couldn't have gotten here naturally!"

"Let's see it! Let's see! Let's see!" came several eager voices; and all of them echoed that disconcerting cry, "No, it couldn't have gotten here naturally! It couldn't have gotten here naturally!"

With a sinking heart, I recalled the bit of crystal broken from my head-lamp.

"There is no material of this glittering type used in the whole ventilation factory," diagnosed one of the voices, soberly. "The texture is different—it must have been brought in by some person—some person who had no license here. Some person who probably caused all the trouble."

"Some person we will have no difficulty in finding, once the Inspection Service gets after him," another added, with an evil chuckle. "By the murky light of his head! I wouldn't like to change places with him!"

"No, the Head Neuter is very stern about interference with the air. He considers it the worst offense, next to falsely impersonating a Neuter . . . . Now be careful, don't lose that crystal. It will furnish the best of clues."

There came another ominous-sounding chuckle, and the voices of the party gradually grew more remote. "If the cause of the trouble isn't discovered soon," I made out, just before they retreated beyond earshot, "isn't it likely that the Head Neuter will come here himself to take charge? . . . . "

Meanwhile, huddled close against Zandaye in our sweaty iron container, I felt chill after icy chill creeping down my spine, and secretly prayed that it would not occur to any of the searchers to look in a certain boiler-shaped machine.

Into the Depths

BUT time went by, and we were not disturbed. Now and then we still heard some excited party passing, still heard the clattering and thudding of tools, but there was nothing to suggest that our presence had been suspected, or that the damage was likely soon to be repaired.

And as we waited, Zandaye and I talked in occasional whispers. "What I have been wondering," she meditated, "is what actually caused all the trouble. The rod your foot pushed against evidently controlled the power, and in your awkwardness you knocked the power-transmitters out of place and cut off the connections of the electro-radium waves, so leaving the plant without any energy supply.

"The forces that bless all good Neuters must be with you! otherwise, you would have been burned to death. The damage will be fixed, however, as soon as they find what rod you disarranged—but who can say when that will be? There are thousands of similar rods in the factory. If we are not still here tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that—"

But this was as far as Zandaye could proceed. Suddenly, from without, there came a rushing, whirring sound, accompanied by a chorus of jubilant shouts. And from somewhere above us there issued a clattering noise, as of the rotation of machinery.

Crouching flat against the iron floor of our retreat, I tried to peer out through one of the air-holes; but the opening was so small that I could not be quite certain what I saw, and I may only have imagined that I caught a glimpse of great revolving belts and huge levers in motion. "The factory is working again!" I exclaimed, in tones that were incautiously loud. "It's working! It's working!"

Before Zandaye had had time to reply, there occurred the most disconcerting event of all. All at once we felt a trembling as of an earthquake; the floor began to shake and shudder, and then slowly was withdrawn from beneath our feet! Is it possible to conceive a more terrorizing situation? At the rate of a few inches a second, our only support was sliding away like a folding door into some unseen recess!

It was as if some invisible power were pulling the strings, while we, the victims, could only stare and await our doom. With frantic violence, Zandaye reached for the door of our prison, but perhaps her very excitement betrayed her—the handle was stuck, and would not pull open! And all the while that she madly wrenched and tugged, the floor was gliding away, revealing an unfathomable black abyss.

It was only a few seconds before Zandaye and I were huddled together on the remaining foot of our support, which also was withdrawing, steadily and mercilessly withdrawing. And the smooth metallic walls offered nothing to clutch at! . . . .

In that last horrible instant, each of us held instinctively to the other—two drowning persons grasping at the same straw! I felt Zandaye's long fingers weaving themselves about my shoulders; my own arms were flung desperately about her neck; I could hear the violent heaving and straining of her breast as it panted against mine. And thus, clinging together, we fell.

We fell, and in imagination lived through the swift, long drop in the darkness. Yet there were no tremendous abysses beneath; our plunge had hardly started when we were jarred to a stop. Not five feet below, we struck some hard object with a painful thud, and, still with arms intertwining, lay sprawled upon a sloping surface.

All about us the blackness was impenetrable; even Zandaye's head-lamp had been extinguished; it was as if we had fallen into Hades. Strangest of all, however, were the grating and grinding metallic noises that came from the gloom all about us; while the sloping surface was not still, but jerked and jolted like the floor of a railroad car.

In that first startling moment, I was so relieved at alighting somewhere that my terror had almost left me. My head was aching; my sides were sore; one arm felt bruised and strained; a faint trickling as of blood was issuing from my nostrils—but that was all. These facts I scarcely noticed; I was more concerned about my companion. "Zandaye, are you—are you hurt?" I inquired, in a broken voice, as she slowly withdrew from my clasp.

She was a moment in answering. "No—no—I—I don't think so," was all she was able to say at first; and then, after a silence, mournfully added, "My head-lamp—I think my head-lamp was hurt. I don't seem able to get it to shine."

But the damage turned out not to be serious; after a minute, a reassuring glitter illuminated the depths around us. By the light of the lamp, we could see that we were in a tunnel—a narrow tunnel, little further across than the distance between my outstretched hands; a tunnel whose walls were gliding past at prodigious speed!

"OH! by the lower shades! Now I see what has happened!" proclaimed Zandaye, slowly, while she hovered close to me as if for protection. "We are on one of the moving freight platforms. One of the platforms used to carry merchandise far, far down into the depths of the world. You see how steep the grade is?"

"Yes," I groaned; for we were descending at an angle of ten or fifteen degrees.

"Evidently our hiding-place was one of the containers for the factory refuse," Zandaye solemnly continued. "As such, it opens automatically at regular intervals, discharging the waste materials on to this platform, which carries them away into the depths."

We were both silent for a moment, staring at the barely visible walls that slipped past us at the rate of an express train.

"How long do you think we will keep going?" I finally asked.

Zandaye groaned. "Maybe for hours and hours. These freight platforms are not very fast, you see. We will go deep, deep down. Down beneath the Favored Depths, where the cultured and honored citizens live. Down beneath the lowest of the Neuter Circles, straight into the world's slums! Down, down, down, among the most wretched elements of the population! For that is where all freight platforms lead. You will be far, far lower, my friend, than you ever were before!"

"That comes of trying to get to the surface!" I sighed, wondering if I should ever see the open air and the starlight again.

Meanwhile, with terrific jolts and jars we went rattling on our way. I do not know how much time passed; I had no way of estimating time; I am sure, however, that Zandaye was right in suggesting that we would travel for hours. But amid all the strain and monotony of that long, dark ride, her presence cheered me in some indefinable way; her voice had a musical ring in my ears, her every gesture had for me a charm that made me feel not altogether unfortunate after all, though we were hurtling through a gloomy unknown cavern.

By insensible degrees, my uninjured arm found its way about her form; my lips moved forward to meet hers, which did not respond, and yet did not withdraw; my words began to quaver with a sentiment they had rarely known before, and I pondered phrases that seemed wild, daring, and wonderfully sweet . . . . And all the while her head-lamp was glowing with the most delicate, the loveliest blue one could imagine.

"Zandaye, what does a blue light in a head-lamp mean?" I inquired, although I had more than half guessed the answer.

Instantly the blue gave place to yellow. Her words came forth by gulps and spasms; she averted her head; had she been an earthly maiden, she might have blushed.

"That—that, my friend, is a question you should not ask," she stammered. "It means—it means I feel—what no one who is to become a Neuter should ever feel! Forgive me—if I feel what I should not feel. I cannot help it! Pay no heed! I cannot control my head-lamp!"

"But, Zandaye, is it possible then—is it possible—" I exclaimed, swept by a new delirious hope. And my arm was reaching around her, and drawing her closer, closer—when all of a sudden I was interrupted by a tremendous jolt, which whirled us both forward against the floor. At the same time, the rattling and grating sounds

in the tunnel ceased, and the movable platform quivered and grew still.

"At last! The end of the road!" whispered Zandaye, as, a little unsteadily, we picked ourselves up. "Follow me. We will wait for the proper moment, and then will slip out. By the eyes of all benighted things! you will find that we are in a miserable district! But somehow we will escape."

I nodded approvingly; for I saw that Zandaye's lamp had again glowed to a celestial blue, and that fact contented me.

CHAPTER XIX

The Afflicted Regions

FOR many minutes we remained in silence on the dark, motionless platform. In the distance an occasional dim light shot up and vanished, but around us all things were lifeless and still. It was not until the platform began to quiver again, as though in readiness for renewed action, that Zandaye seized my hand, and whispered, "Now! Now we can get away without being seen. As you value your head-lamp, waste no time, lest we be carried off again!"

Without another word, we crept forward on hands and knees through the low-roofed, sloping tunnel. The air, I noticed was oppressively close and heavy; foul odors, as of some dank basement, were assailing our nostrils. But, fortunately, it was not long before Zandaye's keen eyes made out a tiny doorway in the tunnel wall. "This way," she whispered; and, after throwing open the gate by means of a barely visible little button, she preceded me into a wider and more airy gallery.

A flood of light burst upon us as we entered; we saw that the walls were illuminated by means of large glaring strips of metal strung at intervals. "Ah, now we can safely talk again!" Zandaye exclaimed. "We are out of the freight tunnel; no one will catch us here. But what I still fear is that we may get lost amid the rubbish heaps."

"I don't see any rubbish heaps," said I; for, except for the dazzling lights, which were painful to my eyes, the gallery seemed pleasant enough.

"Well, you will see them soon!" she promised. "We are in the slums, the Afflicted Regions—the vilest, most poverty-ridden part of the world. By my lamp! you will hold your nose, all right! But I beg you, do not judge our world by its poorest part. Most of our people are also repelled by these lower realms, and recognize them as a blot on civilization."

Naturally, after this introduction, I was prepared for something revolting. I do not know whether I actually expected to have to make my way amid garbage heaps; yet I did half anticipate seeing piles of old tin cans, broken glass and rusted iron; while I had no doubt but that we would encounter men and women of the most squalid and ragged type. However, my fears as to the outcome were quickly quenched. "You need not be afraid of being recognized," Zandaye had insisted, in response to my apprehensive inquiry. "No one down here can see beyond his nose."

In view of my dark surmises, I was astonished at the ensuing discoveries; astonished to be led into a broad, vaulted corridor magnificent as the palace of a king. More magnificent, probably, than the palace of any earthly potentate!—gold and silver were flung about with a lavishness rivalling anything in the "Arabian Nights." The walls were patterned of the precious yellow metal, which, varied by silver and platinum, occupied the entire visible surface; the ceiling was of gold studded with diamonds, emeralds and rubies; the very floor on which we walked was of gold interspersed with gems.

"Can it be real?" I gasped, staring like one in a dream. "Can it be real?" And while Zandaye stood by gazing at me in perplexity and wonder, I remained as if paralyzed, letting my eyes feast upon that superb spectacle.

"What is the matter with you, my friend?" she at length demanded, a little impatiently. "By the lamps of the sages! one would think you had never seen gold before! Of course it is real! Why shouldn't it be? What reason could there be for using an imitation?"

"Why, I—I've never seen anything like it!" was all I was able to blurt out. "Are those—are those diamonds? Are they real, too?"

"Of course! Why not?" There was scorn in Zandaye's voice, and her lamp was alternating between an orange of surprise, and a lavender of amusement. "May the light of my head go out, if you don't seem to admire them! You seem to suffer from the same fever as the people of the slums!"

"People of the slums?" I echoed.

"Certainly! Can't you see for yourself that this is the slum district? What else could it be, with so much refuse lying around?"

Swinging her arms about her in a circle, Zandaye pointed to the gold and silver that glared and glittered in every direction.

Weighed down by earthly prepossessions, I required a minute to grasp the situation. I could not believe the obvious; surely, I thought, Zandaye was only joking!

BUT it was not in a joking manner that she continued, "This trash here, which is of no real use to any one, is valued for some queer reason by the natives of the slums. Anybody with a lamp on his head could see that ordinary rock is better for building purposes; while, as for beauty, who would not prefer marble? But the minds of the slum-dwellers seem to be congenitally clouded; it is an inherited disease, scientists say, handed down from those primitive days when the whole world placed value on trinkets. But alas! there seems to me no way of curing it; once a slum-dweller always a slum-dweller, appears to be the rule. Unfortunately, there is nothing that can be done for these unhappy hoarders of refuse."

While Zandaye was speaking, my eyes were fixed upon group of passing Plutonians. They were broader of build and bulkier, it seemed to me, than most of the natives; while their head-lamps were burning with singular dullness, and,

in fact, seemed to be hardly illuminated at all. But the really remarkable thing about them was their clothes, which were resplendent with bands and streamers of gold, with badges of burnished silver, and with precious gems that adorned them by the score and the hundred and were even visible on the upturned soles of their sandals.

The most lavish care was apparent about their whole personal make-up; their lips were painted in green, moon-shaped curves; their hairless heads were covered with a bluish smudge of powder, and their cheeks were likewise blue-tinged; their ears were weighed down with strings of dangling rubies; and diamonds, sapphires and amethysts hung in chains about their necks.

"Look, Zandaye!" I whispered, hardly able to contain my surprise. "Who are they? Who are those passing celebrities?"

"Celebrities?" she exclaimed. And her head-lamp flashed to a sudden lavender; while she rocked back and forth in babbling laughter. "Celebrities! Great shades of the Lower Depths! but my friend has a sense of humor!"

"I do not mean it as humor," I declared, a little resentfully.

"But, by my lamp, it is delicious!" flung back Zandaye, still not quite recovered from her merriment. "So delicious I must tell it at home—really, I must! Why, those people are not celebrities! They are simply poor slum-dwellers!"

As she made this announcement, Zandaye burst again into a babbling explosion, which left me still in doubt as to whether she were in earnest.

But, after much difficulty, she made me realize the Plutonian point of view. The accumulation of gold or silver, she assured me, was regarded by most of her fellow men as a sign of poverty; for at best a person could possess only a certain amount, and if his hoardings were of a material nature, then they excluded those mental and spiritual acquisitions that constituted the true wealth.

I could not quite follow the tortuous reasoning that led Zandaye to this conclusion; but I did understand that the disdain of most Plutonians for gold and silver was enormous, and that they flung it to their fellows in the nether regions somewhat as we fling garbage to swine.

So far was I myself, however, from sharing Zandaye's attitude that I regarded the riches on the walls and floors with a covetous eye, and missed many of my companion's remarks in my eagerness to slip a few valuables into my pocket. It would be a fine thing, I told myself, if upon returning to earth—and for the moment I forgot that probably I never should return to earth—I should have a few large emeralds or diamonds to show as the practical fruits of the expedition. I even began to wonder whether, after all, flights to Pluto might not be put on a paying basis; whether our expedition might not prove to be the forerunner of an interplanetary gold rush . . . .

Occupied with such thoughts, I actually had the daring, when Zandaye was not looking, to reach into a corner amid some debris, to snatch a ruby as large as a marble, and to secrete it in the folds of my garment. Assuredly, this would not be my only bit of booty were we to remain long in the slums!

The Coming of the Poet

AFTER a few minutes, we turned into a larger corridor, whose hundred-foot arching ceiling was a blaze of gold. This seemed to be a central thoroughfare; swarms of the natives were hurrying noisily in all directions—and not one of them but presented a glorious spectacle, with clothing of gold and silver, or with argent banners and streamers waving after them in the breeze. Even the children, I observed, were adorned with the precious metals, and wore diamonds as lavishly as earthly children wear glass beads.

"By all the powers of darkness! It is pathetic, how poverty-stricken the people here all are!" murmured Zandaye. "It makes one feel like weeping. The worst of it is that none of them seem to realize their plight. Their perceptions have been dulled—you notice how poorly their head-lamps shine . . . ."

Only when Zandaye pointed it out did I observe how, amid the glitter of their surroundings, the head-lamps of the great majority seemed almost extinguished.

"You see, very little of the illumination comes from within," she continued. "Nearly all of it must issue from outside. That is why there is so much glare and bustle here. But what else could one expect, considering the menial occupations of the people?"

"You don't mean to say," I demanded, "that these gorgeously robed persons are menials?"

"I mean to say they have menial occupations," she returned, with a melancholy nod. "Isn't it deplorable! A blemish on our civilization!"

While I was wondering what degrading work the passers-by must perform despite their majestic appearance, Zandaye suddenly halted, and pointed through a sumptuous-looking glass partition to a gilded suite of rooms that might have done service for a duke.

"In there! In there they must toil!" she muttered, contemptuously. "In there they drudge half the hours of their lives! Adding figures! subtracting figures! reckoning profits and losses! speculating, gambling, lying, quarreling, planning trade-balances favorable to themselves! Pity them, the poor slaves! By all gracious light-givers, isn't it unfortunate that such beings exist?"

Passing a door leading into the splendid suite of rooms Zandaye had indicated, I was startled to see a sign, "Bankers and Stock Balancers." And across the way, on a door connecting with an equally elegant-looking suite, there was a sign that read, "Investments. Legal service for hire." Surely, I thought, Zandaye's wits must be wandering!

"The strange thing," she continued, "is that many of these poor benighted creatures choose to remain benighted. Alas! there is no helping them! We send members of welfare organizations down here to convert them; we promise them all sorts of inducements, even suggesting that some of them, if they show sufficient talent, may be eligible to become Neuters. But it is all

of no use. Not one person in a thousand in these lower depths ever rises above his origins; not one in a million is promoted to Neuterhood. There are, of course, always a few who aspire toward the light, but most of them are hopelessly submerged in their environment. No career is open to such wretches except to go on accumulating gold."

Not being able to share Zandaye's point of view, I could only grunt a perfunctory reply; while my companion went on to explain, "Some people believe there is an hereditary curse upon these unfortunates. Others think they come of an inferior racial stock, being really cousins to the beasts. Still others hold that they are being punished for sins committed in previous lives. For myself, I cannot say. I only know they are unhappy, and so my heart goes out to them."

By this time we had reached a secluded platinum alcove, apart from the noise and confusion of the main gallery. Zandaye motioned me to sit down with her here, and after we had deposited ourselves cross-legged on the floor, she relieved her pockets of a number of capsules and other articles of food, which, however, unpalatable, sufficed to allay our hunger.

We had just completed our meal and washed it down with the water from a public tap, when we noticed an unusual tumult in the central gallery. With loud cries and gibberings, the people had withdrawn to the sides of the corridor, and were bobbing up and down and waving their hands beneath them in fantastic bows or salaams, while down the aisle walked a resplendent large-headed figure clad only in the light shed by his own sun-brilliant lamp. Taking advantage of the momentary confusion, I seized a little lump of gold from a cranny in the wall and put it in a safe hiding place; so that, when I again turned to the spectacle in the gallery, the resplendent one had vanished, although a flock of shimmering-gowned individuals that followed him, in the manner of a military escort, were still trooping by in plain view.

"Who is he?" I inquired of Zandaye, thinking him the most imposing-looking Plutonian I had yet seen. "The Head Neuter?"

"Head Neuter?" she laughed. "By my lamp! what queer ideas you have! Tell me, what do you suppose the Head Neuter would be doing here in the Afflicted Regions?"

NOT knowing how to answer, I remained silent.

"No, of course, it was not the Head Neuter," she went on. "But it was some one equally great, or perhaps greater."

"Greater?" I echoed.

"By the radiance of his presence! that is likely. It was a poet."

Dumbfounded, I stared quizzically at Zandaye. But not even a ghost of a flicker of amusement illuminated her features. Her face was grave and solemn, and no trace of lavender had crept into her head-lamp.

"It was a poet, doubtless coming here in search of atmosphere," she continued. "You can see how his admirers follow him about."

"But why—why does every one bow?" I demanded, pointing to the crowd that still bobbed up and down with gestures of homage.

"The Neuters bless you! didn't I say he is a poet?" she repeated, as if that were explanation enough.

But I must have looked the confusion that I felt, for after a moment she went on to declare, "Naturally, the poets are the most honored among us. Why should they not be? for do they not lead the world in a far deeper sense than any statesmen? And so an ancient custom prescribes that they be honored wherever they go."

"But surely down here—" I gasped, too bewildered to control my words—"down here poets are not—"

"Yes, even here the old tradition rules, and men pay their respects to poets, as you can see—though it may be that the inner light is so dull that the worshippers act only out of habit and without any actual feeling of reverence."

I was just about to make some remark regarding the impractical standards of Zandaye's people, when a large emerald, which I observed conveniently near at hand, interrupted my train of thought and turned my mind away from the poets. After a little skillful manipulation, I succeeded in gaining my prize; and at the same time Zandaye, who had observed a prize of quite a different nature, startled me by swooping down into the center of the gallery and picking up a small sheet of paper dropped by the last of the poet's passing admirers.

"By my head-light! Just look!" she exclaimed, coming to me and unfolding the paper, which was filled with the jagged-looking native printing. "Just look! A copy of the *Daily Neuter!* All the latest news! And I was just wondering what was happening in the world. Down here, you know, they hardly ever read newspapers. They are too busy with the stock reports."

Enthusiastically Zandaye let her eyes race along the contents; while I, having no interest in the news, watched her with a yawn and secretly wished for some good sleeping-place. Little did I realize how important that paper was to prove for me!

Suddenly she stopped as if struck. Her mouth opened wide in a gasp; her head-lamp blazed through all the colors of the rainbow. "Why look—just, just look!" she stammered. "Read—read this!"

BUT her eyes darted eagerly down the columns before she would permit me to take the paper. And, glancing over her shoulders, this is what I read:

RUNAWAY SAVAGE CAPTURED

One of Wild Men Gets Away in Break for Freedom

The two savages who recently appeared unexpectedly in our midst, and who have given rise to world-wide discussions in scientific circles, have tried to outwit their captors and escape. These aborigines, whose lack of lamps and general low intelligence are only two among their many remarkable qualities, have been detained pending further investigation by a Committee of Neuters, some of whom maintain that, by means of proper surgical incisions, the less human qualities of our visitors may be eliminated and the secret of their origin determined.

After an exciting chase, one of the runaways was captured late today in the Three Hundred and Eleventh Emergency Tunnel by the Inter-Gallery Rangers. The other, according to the Rangers, would also have been taken had it not been for the serious tieup of the Ventilation Factory, which, by a coincidence, occurred just as the pursuers were closing in on the fugitive.

Owing to this interference, however, the escaped prisoner, who is believed to be also a dangerous lunatic, is still wandering at large; and citizens are urged to be on the outlook for him. He is described as of an extremely ugly and ungainly build; very short and fat; with small weak eyes of a beast-like blue; two fingers missing on each hand, and the other fingers grotesquely short; no head-lamp; an uncouth speech and manner; gigantic mouth of a monstrous red; and a blank but ferocious countenance. Honor awaits his captor dead or alive.

As for the other member of the pair, he is being held in a strictly guarded cell, and is being subjected to the Ninth Rite of Coercion in order to make him divulge the whereabouts of his fellow, which he is believed to know, but steadily refuses to impart. It is held that, by this method, his resistance will be broken down within a day or two at most . . . .

"The Ninth Rité of Coercion!" exclaimed Zandaye, her voice shaking, her lamp by turns red and yellow. "May their heads be stricken lightless, but that is terrible! How can they be so cruel? How can they?"

Her long fingers clenching and unclenching, and her lamp blazing in angry spurts, she stamped all about me for several nerve-racking minutes.

Then, in response to my excited query, she explained, "The Ninth Rite of Coercion is a survival from our primitive ancestors. It is an old form of torture, hardly ever used nowadays. The victim is left all alone in a small dark cell, forced to stand upright without food or drink, without any one to talk to, and without a thing to do. Two or three times a day he is asked whether he is willing to confess, and if he does not answer or answers falsely he is left to his misery for another blank, solitary period. A few days of such treatment is enough to break down a man's spirit if not his mind."

"Heaven preserve us!" I cried. "So that is what is being done to Stark!"

"Yes, by my lamp, that is what is being done to your friend!"

I groaned, and a gloomy silence intervened. I pictured Stark in the throes of his lonely torment; I pictured him suffering, perishing in his loyal failure to divulge my whereabouts. And I remembered what a good friend he had been, and remembered also our long, harrowing adventures together, I groaned again, and a sudden resolve flashed over me.

"Come!" said I, to Zandaye. "Come, we are going back! At once! I shall give myself up. There is no other way to save my friend."

Zandaye too groaned, and hung her head sorrowfully. But in her great blue eyes there was a gleam of approval.

CHAPTER XX

A New Servitude

ON Pluto, no less than on the earth, it is sometimes easier to make a decision than to put it into execution. So, at least, Zandaye and I discovered following my resolve to surrender myself in order to save Stark. Although I continued to be profoundly agitated about my friend's plight, and felt that only my speedy reappearance could rescue him for torments indescribable and possibly from death, I found it no simple matter to make known my whereabouts and identity.

Had we been anywhere else on the planet, the problem might not have been difficult; but alas! the people of these golden galleries were little interested in me or my affairs. Judging from the attention they paid to me, I might not have existed at all; they were flitting through their blazing corridors with such haste that they took no notice when I called to them, when I motioned them with excited gestures, or even when I sought to seize them by the arm as they bustled past.

After many minutes of exasperating efforts, during which I felt as if I were beckoning to ghosts, I abandoned the attempt in despair, and dismally turned to Zandaye for advice.

"By the lamps of all Neuters!" she swore, shaking her head knowingly. "This is only what I expected! I told you the people down here can't see further than their noses. What is more, they are deaf to all sounds except the clinking of metal."

"But isn't there anything at all we can do?"

She nodded, doubtfully. "Every one here is too much worried over business to care about any one else's troubles. They have a motto that it pays no dividends to lend a helping hand. So, if you value your friend's life, we'd better be looking elsewhere. I do not know how far we are from the end of the Afflicted Regions, but maybe if we commence climbing we will soon escape."

There being nothing else to do, I accepted Zandaye's suggestion, and, with a reeling head, started with her through a succession of upward-leading galleries. But for a long while we noticed little change of environment. Everywhere the walls, floors and ceilings were lined with gold, silver and precious stones; everywhere the natives were rushing past at heedless haste.

Some of them, we noticed, carried enormous gleaming burdens around their necks, which hung low as if in shame; others, borne down by no such weights, went gliding round and round in circles, their outstretched hands clutching at emptiness; here and there two or three were writhing and wrestling unnoticed on the floor, tearing at one another with long bloody fingers like the claws of beasts; while all, no matter what their occupation, seemed oblivious of our coming and paid no heed to our cries and gesticulations.

Sheer worriness at last put a halt to our search. It was many, many hours since either of us had had more than a snatch of sleep; and, urgent as was our mission, we had to pause in a niche between two golden pillars, which, while too hard

for comfort, at least did afford us some seclusion. There we both fell almost instantly itno a deep slumber of sheer exhaustion, from which we awakened I do not know how much later, feeling sore all over but otherwise refreshed.

And now it was that Zandaye, who usually made no lamentations on her own behalf, permitted herself a moment of dreary reflection:
then it is even possible that the Maximum Pen-
that I helped the two prisoners to escape—well,
my Pre-Neuter studies. And if it becomes known
manded by my Governing Superior for neglecting
have been noted . . . . I will probably be repri-
pen to me when we get back. My absence will
"By my lamp! I do not know what will hap-
alty—"

"But Zandaye, Zandaye," I interrupted, not-

(Illustration by Paul)

They would occupy themselves endlessly in making charts and maps of our heads.

ing the melancholy light in her eyes and the gloomy fading of her head-lamp, "I do not want you to undergo any more risks for my sake. If it is better for you, we must part at once. Then it will never be known that you aided me. Yes, Zandaye, I fear we must part at once."

The last words came forth with an effort; for I could not but shudder at the thought of separating from my beloved companion.

But the brilliance came back into her head-lamp, and there was fresh energy in her voice as she replied, "By the honor of a Pre-Neuter! do you believe I would desert you? Do you think I would come all this distance with you, only to forsake you now? What! then you imagine our people have no sense of right and wrong? Forget the danger to myself! What does that count? I faced it willingly; yes, I faced it gladly—for did I not face it for you?"

"For me?" I gasped; and, looking at her closely, I noticed how wistful, how tender was the light in those intense blue eyes of hers.

"FOR me?" I repeated. "For me?" And suddenly I was swept by the consciousness of something strange, something unbelieva

ble. Her head-lamp had again flamed to a heavenly azure; and my intimation as to the meaning of that color was vividly confirmed.

"Zandaye," I murmured; and I allowed my hand to slide into hers, I allowed my fingers to intertwine with her long ones. For the moment I forgot that she was a Plutonian, and I a native of the earth; I forgot that she wore a head-lamp and no hair, that she had fourteen enormous fingers, and came from a race with manners and ideals alien to our own.

All that I knew was that she was a fellow creature, a woman, and one who was infinitely kind and infinitely dear; and, at that knowledge, my heart beat fact, my breath came short and hard; the millions of miles between us were blown away in a flash, and nothing mattered except a kinship that seemed above time and space. And so my arms reached forth, and were about to enfold her, would have enfolded her—when all at once she leapt up, freed herself from me, and exclaimed, with resolution in her voice:

"Come! We must not forget ourselves! We have a mission to fulfill! By the mother that gave me birth! how can I listen to you? I know the thoughts that leap in your brain, the floods that stir in your heart. But you must check them, calm them. I cannot listen. For I—I am to become a Neuter!"

With panting breast and head-lamp beatifically blue, she stood facing me proudly, while tenderness tempered by determination spoke in her long, shapely face. And, as I stared at her, my heart sank within me, even while my admiration, my passion grew; for it was as if I already knew that her resolve was irrevocable.

"But, Zandaye," I murmured, in faltering tones, "tell me at least, Zandaye, that I am something to you—that I am more than the stones beneath your feet!"

"You are more to me than the eyes that give me vision! You are more than the lamp that shows me the way!" she swore, fervently, although without raising her voice. "Yet you cannot be more to me than my purpose in the world. For that belongs not to me, but to my race . . . . Come now, we must not talk of that any more. Let us waste no time, since it still may not be too late to save your friend."

Resignedly I bowed my head; for I perceived the futility of protest. Only too well I realized the truth behind her final words—what right had I to be lingering here, talking of fond and foolish things, when every moment might bring fresh peril and agony to Stark?

And so for many minutes we spoke no more, but plodded again along an upward-sloping gallery, and followed many a difficult winding and many a long flight of stairs in our efforts to escape the gold-littered mazes. I noticed that there was a thoughtful glitter in Zandaye's eyes, and that the blue light had not left her head-lamp; and I too was thoughtful, although I did not try to be communicative . . . .

But let me pass over all this difficult period, and tell how, after hours of walking, we observed a welcome change in our environment, and came out of the labyrinths of precious metals and gems into a still more remarkable district . . . .

Evidently we had been only in the upper levels of the Afflicted Regions; otherwise, we would not have been able to escape so soon. As it was, however, a series of vigorous climbs took us to a height that dwellers in the Afflicted Regions never attained.

No longer was our route lined with gold and silver; no longer did hurrying throngs dart heedlessly past. The atmosphere, as if by some impalpable influence, seemed to grow lighter and easier to breathe; it was as if a weight, a pressure had all at once been removed; and our spirits rose by swift degrees at the sight of galleries that were wider and airier and less brightly but more tastefully illuminated.

I should say, in fact, that never had I seen more exquisite taste displayed anywhere. We roamed through great columned aisles endlessly branching and interbranching, like those of some colossal cathedral; we gazed upward at gently curving ceilings glowing in a luminous haze; we stared at walls that seemed translucent, crystalline, as though the light, of the hue of moonbeams, seeped through at all points from invisible luminaries.

Here and there was a painting, a bas-relief, a statute; and these decorations were neither so numerous as to be ornate, not so few as to be exceptional; but all had the most elegant and imposing simplicity, in which a consummate artistry of design was balanced by an equally consummate artistry of concealment.

"Where are we now?" I inquired of Zandaye, while, transfixed with wonder, I roamed through those magnificent halls.

"In the Studio Residential District," she declared. "It extends for hundreds of miles, and it is all as beautiful as this. This is the region reserved for the most accomplished among the Neuters—the writers of poetry and music and drama, the sculptors and painters, the actors, the architects, the leaders in the dance. It is thought that great art can flower most splendidly only among surroundings of great art."

"I do not doubt that," I declared, thinking that I myself might almost become artistic were I to remain here long. "But where are the dwellers in this superb section?"

A Tribute to Art

BEFORE Zandaye had had time to reply, the answer came from an unexpected source. Out of a small side-gallery, several gleaming figures emerged, evidently attracted by the sound of our voices. They were all exceptional in their slenderness and height, in the size of their heads and the brilliancy of their head-lamps; and all, being Neuters, walked unimpeded by any clothing.

Upon seeing us, they burst into a low babbling of laughter, pointed to us with curious gestures, and immediately surrounded us; while from half a dozen unobserved entrances their fellows issued, until we found ourelves in the midst of a fair-sized crowd.

About most of these creatures there was some-

thing so resplendent, so ethereal that I could almost have imagined myself in the presence of celestial beings. And in their voices, as they turned to one another with excited exclamations that I could not catch, there was a musical softness and resonance not to be found among most of the Plutonians. "Truly, they look like artists!" I reflected; and then, remembering the urgency of my mission among them, I attempted to speak, to tell them who I was, and to induce them to deliver me to the proper authorities.

Most of my words, it appeared, were superfluous—how could these intelligent personages fail to know who I was? They were little interested, however, in what I had to say, and my requests bore no more weight than a child's entreaties. After scores of them had examined me with inquiring eyes, and little groups had engaged in eager whispered conversations, one of them—evidently their self-constituted leader—turned to me with long hands uplifted, and announced:

"My friend, you are to dwell among us for a while. It is true that the Head Neuter is looking for you; but he does not yet know you are here, and will be all the more pleased to find you when you are at last surrendered. Have no fear; we will treat you kindly."

"But I must be given up at once!" I cried, despairingly. "My friend must be saved from torment!"

Peculiar smiles flickered across the faces of the artists.

"Do not be alarmed," one of them advised. "We are a humane people; we do not put any man to more torment than he can bear. When your friend reaches the limits of his endurance, the Ninth Rite of Coercion will be relaxed."

There was little enough consolation in this suggestion; yet it appeared useless for me to argue. I pleaded and pleaded until my voice was hoarse; then, as a last desperate measure, I reminded my new masters that a reward had been offered for my capture—but they only laughed at the announcement. "What," they demanded, "are we then mere children, to be moved by the thought of reward? No! our only reward can be in the advancement of our art! It is for this reason that we are holding you here!"

How I could advance their art was more than I could imagine; but before long I was enlightened. In the company of fifty or sixty of the artists, amid whom Zandaye walked unnoticed, I was conducted to a large colonnaded court, whose pillars were all of iridescent crystal, and against whose walls a hundred many-colored fountains were playing. A brief intermission occurred, during which Zandaye and I were offered food; and then began an ordeal of an unexpected nature.

The artists crowded about me so closely that most of them had to stand on tiptoes in order to see; while a few, in the rear, elevated themselves upon pedestals or upon tall improvised platforms Some, to my surprise, produced palettes and a canvas-like cloth and began to paint; others began modelling out of a dough-like substance; still others made hasty sketches in black and white; while not a few displayed note-books and commenced to scribble enthusiastically.

Yet I was not pleased as I watched the development of their work, and particularly of the paintings and busts, which, I was told, strove to bring out my "underlying spirit", and which depicted me as all mouth and ears, with an expression as humane and enlightened as a gorilla's. In such a manner, I was assured, I was to be "immortalized".

But not all the artists were trying to produce complete pictures. Some confided themselves to details; one devoted hours to perfecting an enormous likeness of my nose, not neglecting to bring out the detail of a pimple with photographic reality; another did nothing but represent my eyelashes, and still another portrayed my teeth, which, being much larger and more numerous than the native variety, were regarded as curiosities.

But most remarkable of all was one who made pictures little larger than a postage stamp, to which, upon their completion, he applied a little buzzing electrical tube. "This magnifies the illustrations a hundred diameters, and makes it possible to flash them all over the world," he explained. "Whenever I give the release signal, people in every far-off gallery will instantly see your eyes, your ears, your lips represented upon a screen . . . . "

If this was fame, surely I should have enjoyed it. Yet never was I more bored than in those long hours when I served as an unwilling model. The worst of the matter was that one sitting did not suffice; I was forced to pose on several occasions; I was detained for days, and was so well guarded that there was no possibility of escape—and meanwhile what unbearable pests were harrying me!

I think the most irritating were the novelists, who insisted on examining every hair of my body in order that they might omit no detail from their realistic stories; but the musical composers were nearly as bad, for they desired to represent my prevailing mood in symphonies which, while generally applauded, sounded to my inexperienced ears like the rattling of kitchen dishes. The poets, again, made my life a misery by their greed to celebrate in verse the "shades and nuances" of my thought; yet, for all that I could gather, they had more to say about the shape of my arms and feet than about anything that went on within me.

As examples, let me quote, as nearly as I can translate them, some stray lines that come back to memory out of the many composed in my honor:

> O creature of the blue-eyed, lampless head,
> Who breathes, yet walks in darkness like the dead,
> You come among us like a ghost to show
> How our wild forbears, age on age ago,
> With idiot faces, gaping and inane,
> Were monsters, gross of build and weak of brain.

I freely confess that such lines did not fill me with any enthusiasm for Plutonian poetry, and

that I failed to see either their beauty or their wisdom. But I dared not criticize, since I was told that I was no student of poetry; and so I merely grumbled a bit and kept my own counsel, while whole reams of similar effusions were being prepared for world-wide distribution.

It will be believed, therefore, that my eagerness to reach Stark was not my only reason for rejoicing when at last I was informed that my incarceration among the artists was approaching its end; that the Ruling Neuters had been notified of my presence, and that, along with Zandaye, I should be sent for on the following day.

CHAPTER XXI

The Ninth Rite of Coercion

AFTER bidding a none-too-regretful farewell to our artistic friends, Zandaye and I were placed upon another movable platform, and went whirling away for scores of miles through a darkness illuminated only by Zandaye's head-lamp.

"I do hope we're not sent before the Head Neuter! By my lamp! I do hope we're not sent before the Head Neuter!" she kept repeating, as we dashed and clattered along our course. "How would I ever live down the disgrace?"

And I, trying my best to console her, allowed my arm more than once to slip around her waist; though always she would gently disengage herself, and would remonstrate, "No, no, my friend, you must not! Were I not to become a Neuter—then it would be different. But now, of all times; now, I am under suspicion, and perhaps will soon be under trial, I must behave worthily. Embraces are not permitted to Pre-Neuters."

Even as she spoke, her head-lamp glowed to a beautiful blue that belied her words; and I still saw reason to believe that, with a favorable turn of fortune, my suit would not be hopeless.

But then suddenly I recalled my own predicament; recalled that I was being summoned before I knew not what judges to answer for my flight—and that I might undergo a brain operation from which there could be no recovery. At the same time, I thought of Stark, who, for all I knew, might have succumbed already to his tormentors; and, thinking of him and wondering in what condition if at all I should see him again, I was able for the time to forget Zandaye and my desire for her.

Now once more I was filled with an overwhelming impatience to reach the end of my journey, to see my old friend, to know that all did not go so badly with him as I had imagined . . . . And so the minutes seemed never-ending, the hours age-long before the termination of our rattling ride in the dark.

But at last we did jerk to the long-awaited stop. A door was flung open, and a torrent of light flashed upon us; we heard a tumult of voices, and saw a wavering of head-lamps; then several long-armed individuals stepped forward, and, ranging themselves as captors about us, led Zandaye and me down miles and miles of dark, sloping corridors.

I half believed we were now on our way to the Head Neuter; and so did Zandaye, to judge from the yellow glow of her head-lamp. The end of our journey, accordingly, was to be a welcome surprise. Passing a doorway guarded by one of the monstrous domestic animals, with the six long legs, the huge greenish mouth and the crocodile-like teeth, Zandaye and I both gave a exclamation of sudden joy. With a delightful cry, a well known figure rushed forward to greet us!

It was Stark—Stark, alive and well! The first glimpse showed me that he was unusually thin and pale; but at least it was he!—at least he had survived! "Dan—Dan!—you back again? And Zandaye, too!" he cried, in a faltering voice, apparently even more surprised than I—and his hand shot out and seized mine in such a clasp as I had rarely felt before.

"But, Dan," he exclaimed, as soon as he was able to speak halfway coherently, "Dan—I—I did not expect to see you. I—I thought you were being sentenced to the Ninth Rite—"

"The Ninth Rite of Coercion?" I finished for him. "What do you mean to say—"

"You mean to say you weren't sentenced to it at all?" he interrupted, in a flustered way. "Why, they told me—"

"They told me you were undergoing it yourself!" I broke in.

"Then they told us both the same story!" he shrilled, and joined me in sudden loud laughter.

By this time our captors were passing from the room, leading the mournful-eyed Zandaye away with them. Stark had barely had time to press her hand, and I had barely had a chance to motion her a hasty farewell before she had glided out of sight.

Sobered by her disappearance—for who could say when I should see her again—I listened in a solemn mood as Stark went on, "Why, I certainly am astonished. They have been telling me that you were captured and were being submitted to the Ninth Rite, which would not be relaxed until I told where we had come from.

"Picture then my predicament, for at first I actually kept repeating the truth: that we had come from a far-off planet—which aroused the lamp-heads first to amusement, and then to anger. It was impossible to make them take my statements seriously; they insisted that we must have come up from the unexplored bowels of their own world; and I was racking my brains to think of some plausible falsehood to save you."

"And at the same time," I cried, "I was giving myself up to save you!" Whereupon I mentioned the printed report that he was being tortured.

UPON hearing this announcement, Stark looked puzzled for a moment; but it was not long before an explanation flashed over him. "Can't you see, that was just a ruse?" he pointed out. "They thought you might read the newspaper article, and if so, you would be deceived, and give yourself up."

I could only nod dismally in reply.

"Now tell me, Andrew, what has been happening to you all this time?" I demanded, after a moment. "Let me hear the whole story!"

"Why, there isn't so much of a story," he declared, reflectively. "You know as well as I what happened in that dark tunnel when we

were trying to escape with Zandaye. In our mad rush, I stumbled over some invisible object, and the few seconds I lost in that way made me lag far behind. I do not know whether you saw me fall, for you and Zandaye dashed on and on—"

"No, this is the first I knew of it."

"Well, at any rate, the fact is that I thought I saw you creeping through a small hole in the tunnel wall ahead of me; but before I had reached the opening you were out of sight and our pursuers were all around me. In that terrible second, luckily, I did not lose my head; when they seized me and demanded where you had gone, it came to me to point straight ahead, so putting them on the wrong track.

"Their top-lamps were flaring and gleaming in a way to show intense excitement; and evidently they were too much agitated to detect the false note in my voice, for they accepted my word without hesitation, and darted with me straight ahead through the long gallery. Of course, they did not find you, and their lamps became red-hot with rage, and they made all sorts of threats when they began to suspect that I had duped them. But I pleaded that I could not know what side-path you had taken—and this was true, was it not? At all events, they started back with oaths and growls, and, I believe, would still have found you—if at about this time they hadn't heard some exciting news. The whole planet's ventilation system was out of order! Then you should have seen the stir and commotion!

"My captors seemed to lose their heads completely; they acted like men aboard a sinking ship; they shrieked and yelled that they were all going to be suffocated, and for a while seemed to forget about me altogether. This offered an opportunity, and I was planning how to escape again, and was already slipping away—when, as bad luck would have it, the ventilation started again, and I was caught sneaking off into a little side-gallery."

IN a cautious whisper, I informed Stark of the part I had played in interfering with the ventilation; and this pleased him so much that he enjoyed another long spasm of laughter.

"Well now, having been captured," I went on to inquire, "what have you been doing all these days since we parted? Evidently you haven't been having a very bad time of it?"

"No, not a very bad time," he admitted, pointing with a shrug about the spacious, well illuminated room. "I've been right here pretty nearly all the time—and can't complain about my treatment. The lamp-heads have lent me all the books I wanted, and would come in now and then to talk—but of course there wasn't any hope of escape. You saw that enormous six-legged black brute at the entrance?"

I acknowledged having seen the creature.

"Well, he seems to be a sort of watch-dog. At any rate, he's posted there at the door all the time—and never takes it into his great stupid head to desert his post. Once, when I had almost choked down my fears and tried to pass him, he made such a dash at me with those crocodile teeth that I broke all speed records getting back into the room. Since then, I've never tried to get away."

After I had heard Stark's story, he wished to learn of my own adventures; and so I consumed the better part of an hour in telling of my experiences in the Ventilation Factory, the Afflicted Regions, and the artistic district. To all that I had to say, Stark listened with intense interest, but from time to time a wistful smile crossed his face, and it was clear that he envied me my long companionship with Zandaye, as well as my acquaintance with strange and far-off parts of the planet.

He was particularly impressed when I described the lower levels, with their golden corridors; and I can still picture how his large blue eyes almost popped out of his head, and how enthusiastically he stroked his forehead with its artificial lamp, at the sight of the precious stones and the lumps of gold which I had secreted in my garments and displayed to him with sly and furtive gestures.

"Now when we get back to earth," he declared, as he carefully examined the gems, turning them over and over in his hands as if to make sure they were genuine, "we will have these as tangible evidences of our accomplishments. Aside from their value, they will be souvenirs—"

But suddenly he broke short, a if remembering something. "However, will we ever get back to earth?" he lamented, shaking his head sorrowfully; and a low moan came from between his lips. "Will we ever, ever get back?"

"Yes, will we ever get back?" I echoed. "Will we ever get back?" And for a moment we were both silent, absorbed in our own melancholy thoughts.

"I do not know why they are holding us here," Stark at length resumed, meditatively. "But, certainly, it is not on account of our beauty. We can thank our stars if we don't face the very fate we tried to run away from."

"Yes, and what's more, our record in running away won't help us!" I mourned. "If only Zandaye too doesn't suffer the consequences!"

Before Stark had had time to reply, we heard a commotion of voices from without, and the door was flung abruptly open.

"You will come this way, please!" bellowed a shimmering-robed individual, thrusting his head through the door. "The Committee of Neuters desires to see you!"

CHAPTER XXII

The Trial

WAN-EYED and trembling, Stark and I arose, and exchanging dismal glances, hastened through our prison door and out into the corridor, where half a dozen attendants were waiting to receive us.

In their company, we made a journey of many miles, partly on foot but mostly on traveling platforms, and at length were conducted into an enormous, high-ceilinged hall, in whose gleaming recesses hundreds of Plutonians were squatted or sprawled upon the floor. Upon our arrival, they all sat up as if at attention, and uttered low

cries of pleasure; and many a seven-fingered hand was pointed at us in beckoning interest.

But taking no heed of them, we passed on down the aisle to a wide elevated platform at one end, where we were bidden to be seated. We noted with surprise that the platform had only one solitary occupant—none other than Zandaye, whose head-lamp glared with a yellow of dread, and whose eyes were moist as if with weeping. We nodded to her, and she made mournful acknowledgement of our greeting; but since our captors took seats within hand's grasp, there was little that we could say.

Fortunately, we had only a few minutes to wait. Then a sudden commotion became manifest amid the audience. As if at some common signal, all of the waiting hundreds leapt to their feet; they flung their long arms enthusiastically ceiling-ward, and waved and gesticulated like madmen; their voices were lifted in an excited shouting, then became blended in the tones of a tumultuous song, of which all that I could catch was a line beginning:

"The Neuters come, they come!"

As these words dinned in my ears, I noticed a group of ten unclad dignitaries gliding through a doorway opposite with brilliantly sparkling head-lamps. Slowly and sedately they approached, while the chanting and the wild gesticulations continued; straight toward us they walked, and, mounting the platform, ranged themselves on the floor only a few yards from our attendants and ourselves.

Now by degrees the uproar subsided, until at last the whole hall had lapsed into silence,—a silence that, contrasting with the pandemonium of the moment before, bore down upon us like something heavy, threatening, portentous. Nor was the evil spell relieved when the hush was broken by the most august-looking of the new arrivals.

Designating Stark and myself with a seven-fingered hand, he demanded, in husky tones of terrible volume, "Let the business of the day begin! Bring the prisoners before us; let us hear the charges, that we may pass sentence, releasing the innocent and condemning the guilty!"

So still, so silent had the audience become that, for a moment, had I closed my eyes, I could have believed myself alone in empty space.

Then, ending the tenseness of the mood, there came the voice of one of our attendants, who spoke with head based as if in prayer:

"O Lord Neuters, never for many sequons have we had any more important cases to be decided than today! Never, indeed, since that historic trial, which no man now living is old enough to recall, when a newly made Neuter broke the vows of his Order and sought, by surreptitious means, to find a chemical formula to restore him to malehood and the woman he loved.

"Following the judgment in that classical case, when the penalty was such that no one has ever dared repeat the offense, it has not been given to any Committee to decide any matter so vital for the welfare of the ruling sex as that which is placed before you today. Shall I proceed, O eminent Lords?"

"Proceed!" ordered the august-looking one, with a roar.

The heads of all the audiences were craning forward eagerly; hundreds of lamps scintillated with white sparks and flashes. But Zandaye's luminary was of a fluttering yellow, and my own luminary—had I possessed one—would probably have been more brightly yellow still.

"We have today three persons to be tried," continued the attendant, in oratorical tones, while poor Zandaye averted her eyes and hid her face for shame. "Two of them are not natives of our land, and I will not presume to say of what land they are natives, although they are sometimes known as the Half-Men, and sometimes as the Missing Links. The other is one of our own citizens, and one who has already risen to the honorable position of Pre-Neuter. Her name, in fact—"here the speaker paused long enough to glance at a bit of paper in his hand—"is Zandaye Zandippar, Pre-Neuter No. PX 285 AZ. She is charged with being a collaborator in the crimes of the two other defendants. Shall we consider her case first?"

"By all means!" snapped the judge. "As one of our own citizens, she has the right to be sentenced first! Now, Pre-Neuter PX 285 AZ, will you take your place before us?"

SLOWLY and falteringly, with head-lamp still a pitiable yellow, Zandaye arose and faced the ten dignitaries.

"What are the specific charges?" bawled the leading Neuter.

Another silence followed, while the head-lights of the audience sparkled more brilliantly than ever. Then slowly and portentously the attendant opened a long roll of paper, and began to read:

"Zandaye Zandippar, Pre-Neuter PX 285 AZ, of the class of the Sequon 996,433 D.F., is accused of facilitating and abetting the revolt of two prisoners known as the Lampless Ones, alias the Ten-Fingered Barbarians, alias the Big Mouths. She is charged with having neglected her Pre-Neuter studies for a period of eight or ten days, absenting herself even from the Bi-Sequonal examination on Neuter Ideals and Accomplishments. She is also alleged to have penetrated into the Afflicted Regions, where no Pre-Neuter is allowed without a special visitor's blank; while it is claimed that subsequently she loitered without a permit in the Studio Section, where she was found in the company of the Lampless Ones, alias the Weedy-Headed. Aside from that—"

"That will do!" interrupted the judge, severely. "It is needless to hear any further charges. What I have already heard is sufficient, if proved, to justify the maximum penalty. Well, PX 285, what have you to say?"

Poor Zandaye, it appeared, had very little to say. Her head-lamp flickered and almost went out, then burst into an irregular series of yellow sparks; while her voice, faltering and unsteady, could barely utter, "I—I—my Lord Neuter—I know the charges are all true. But—but there are extenuating circumstances."

"What's that?" bellowed the Lord Neuter.

"Extenuating circumstances for violating your Pre-Neuterhood?"

The audience leaned forward more breathlessly, more tensely than ever; while in the greenish eyes of the ten Neuters there was a hard, accusing light.

"I——I—I wanted to help the other two prisoners," stammered Zandaye. "They—they were strangers in our land—and I wanted to help them. I—I did not think it would harm any one—and they were so helpless, and so much in need of me!"

"Is that all?" thundered the spokesman of the Neuters. "Was there no other reason?"

"No, no other reason," denied Zandaye.

But as she spoke, unfortunately, a tinge of blue came into her head-lamp, to vanish almost instantly. It was only a flash, and many an eye would not have observed it at all; yet none of the Neuters seemed to miss it or its possible meaning.

"PX 285, you need say no more!" howled the magistrate, while his fellow Neuters cast shocked glances at one another. "You have betrayed yourself! You have revealed a tender sentiment forbidden to all Pre-Neuterites! And so there can be but one possible decision! What do you say, colleagues?"

All the assembled Neuters solemnly nodded, and their leader went on to decide, "I grieve to pass judgment, for it troubles me, my child, worse than it does you—particularly in view of your extreme youth, for you cannot be more than sixty or seventy sequons old. But the law is the law, and must be respected; though only twice before, in all my five hundred sequons of service, have I been obliged to perform a similar duty. Therefore listen carefully, PX 285! I prescribe the Maximum Penalty. You must give back your pledge of Pre-Neuterhood, and pass the rest of your days as a female!"

The blood-curdling scream that followed these words was the most frightful I have ever heard. Even the hard greenish eyes of the judges seemed moved to pity; even the spectators were softened to tears as Zandaye uttered that terrible cry, and then, her whole form suddenly limp and lifeless, fell helplessly to the floor.

But after a few minutes, during which the spectators crowded forward and there was much excited fluttering back and forth on the platform and restoratives were hastily applied by the Neuters, the stricken girl managed to open her eyes again, although in a wan, weak way, as though the sight of the world had suddenly become unbearable to her.

"She will be all right again in a little while," pronounced the chief of the Neuters, unconcernedly. "Let her be borne out and allowed to rest. Now we may resume the hearing."

Gradually the spectators settled back to their seats on the floor; gradually the Neuters glided again into their places; gradually order was restored while Zandaye, supported by two attendants, was led tottering from the room.

But neither Stark nor I, as the moment of our own ordeal approached, cared very much about the results. For now, because of us, Zandaye had been condemned; and our own fate seemed a minor matter while we still saw the torment in her flooded blue eyes and heard her disconsolate cries ringing and ringing in our ears.

CHAPTER XXIII

Crushing Evidence

FROM the long, portentous silence that followed Zandaye's departure, and from the vivid manner in which the head-lamps of the spectators glittered as they turned to one another with eager glances, we could see that the curtain was only beginning to unroll on a long awaited scene.

It was with an impressive slowness of manner and with an impressive drawl that one of the attendants arose, opened a long scribbled document, and commenced to read:

"Now we come to the case of the Lampless Ones, alias the Brute-Faced, alias—"

"Here, let us waste no more time!" thundered one of the Neuters, interrupting with a scowl. "The prisoners, I am told have no less than sixty-one aliases! Let them be designated instead by name or number!"

From the audience there came a low approving murmur.

"Illustrious Lords," answered the attendant, apologetically, "among the many things which the prisoners lack are names. It is true that they have been asked to be called by some barbaric combination of sounds, which offend the ear and which of course we cannot heed. Their numbers, however, have been recorded. If you wait, I shall find them."

A long, tense minute passed, while the eyes of the attendant searched and searched the papers in his hand. "By my lamp! here we have it!" he exclaimed at last. "Unclassified GH 1987 XZ, and Unclassified GH 1987 A-XZ."

"Very good!" nodded several Neuters, in chorus. "Now proceed!"

The attendant accordingly read:

"The prisoners are accused on thirteen counts, of which the first is that they have come to the Neuter Corridors without legal permission, and have refused to explain their origin, other than to tell some story regarding different worlds, which would fail to deceive the intelligence of a child. The second count is that, for some strange reason, they have killed several of the small domestic animals known as Rattos, scorched the flesh and used it as food—"

Gasps and murmurs of horror escaped from the audience in such a chorus that the reader had to pause.

"What is that you say?" burst forth the husky voice of a Neuter. "Is it necessary to read all these revolting details? Can you not spare the sensibilities of your hearers, and pass over all examples of moral flagrancy and crimes against nature?"

The reader bowed his head, and acknowledged, "It was written here on the paper, O distinguished Lords, but I should not have defiled my lips by mentioning such abominations. If you will not graciously accord me your pardon, I will willingly suffer the just penalty under the Anti-Ugliness Statute."

"Proceed!" pronounced one of the Neuters, magnanimously. "You are pardoned!"

Meanwhile Stark and I, inwardly writhing, sat staring at one another with hopeless glances. If the lightest of our offenses had been received so sternly, what would be said of our more serious breaches?

"Count Three!" The voice of the reader rang out with accusing severity; while the hundreds of spectators leaned forward with the relish of onlookers at a play. "Count Three! The prisoners, though well and courteously received, though housed and fed like our own citizens, and though about to be accorded medical attention which would have removed their natural deficiencies, are charged with having violated our hospitality and with entering the Inter-Gallery Depths by means of the Forbidden Tunnels, where one of them was arrested by the Inter-Gallery Rangers; while the other—Unclassified GH 1987 A-XZ—had not the good grace to yield to his pursuers, but escaped to commit even more gross violations. Shall I read the specific charges, O majestic Lords?"

"Read them!" bawled one of the Neuters. "That is, if they be not unmentionable!"

"They are nearly so," testified the attendant. "Yet I may have to continue, though my tongue recoils before the very monstrosities I must utter. Count Four! Unclassified GH 1987 A-XZ, having broken into the Ventilation Factory, where not even a Neuter is admitted except in cases of world-wide emergency or under a special permit from the Governing Council, repaid the good that had been done him by evil, and, by cleverly disarranging the ventilation machinery, cut off the world's supply of fresh breezes and precipitated a crisis that might have cost millions of lives had the ventilation not soon been restored."

THE speaker halted, and an ominous silence fell. It seemed to me suddenly as if I were the target of a thousand hostile shafts; all eyes appeared to be pointed in my direction, and all eyes blazed with a green anger and malice.

"Count Four," proclaimed the spokesman of the Neuters, in slow, significant accents, "is by far the most serious of all. It is clear how depraved any individual must be before he would attack the young and helpless, and deprive millions of invalids and infants of their fresh draughts. I will not believe such a charge without evidence. Unclassified GH 1987 A-XZ, is it true that you deliberately planned to tie up the Ventilation Factory?"

Such was my bewildered state of mind that it was a minute before I could reply; and meanwhile the silence and the stares of the Neuters and the spectators bore down upon me like some mad terror in a nightmare. In my sudden sharp dismay, I could not believe that my presence in the Ventilation Factory had actually been discovered; could not think that my accusers were making more than a shrewd guess. At the same time, I was shaken with anger to feel how my intentions had been misconstrued.

"No, Honored Lords, it is not true that I planned to tie up the Ventilation Factory!" I surprised myself by exclaiming, as I shot to my feet. "Nothing could have been further from my desires! What would I, a stranger in your land, know of your Ventilation Plant? There is no evidence! I assure you, Honored Lords, there can be no evidence!"

"No evidence?" The cry was flung at me like a challenge. "You say there is no evidence? By my lamp! let us see! Noble Lords, let us see!"

Thereupon, springing abruptly to his feet, one of the attendants approached me with arms brandished as if in a threat; while between two of his outstretched fingers there glistened a little crystal object.

"Look! Look here!" he screamed. "Let us make the test, and discover whether there is no evidence!"

At first I had no conception of what he meant; but during his ensuing speech an illumination burst upon me.

"Look! Look, august Lords!" he continued, while the eyes of the Neuters glistened with excitement, and agitated murmurs sounded from all points of the hall. "Here is a piece of crystal picked up in the Ventilation Factory just after the recent tie-up. It was evident, as soon as it was discovered, that it had been left by the intruder responsible for all the trouble; for no crystal of this glittering type is used in the Factory.

"Moreover, it was found, upon microscopic examination, that it was the sort of material in use for artificial head-lamps, and for no other purpose. And since artificial head-lamps are very rare (not one person in a million being so injured as to need them), it was easy for the Tabulation Department of the government to trace all the wearers of such accessories in this part of the world. The search, I need hardly say, was swiftly conducted—but we found no person from whose head-lamp this fragment might have been broken.

"Naturally, we were baffled, until, upon capturing the second of our two prisoners, GH 1987 A-XZ, we discovered that he not only had an artificial head-lamp, but one that had had a piece chipped off in an accident. All that now remains to be determined is whether the particle in our possession matches the fracture in his head-lamp."

"Good! Good!" exclaimed several of the Neuters, in chorus. "Very good! Excellent!" And their long hands fondled their chins in evident relish; while from the audience came mutterings of anticipation and delight.

As for me, I prayed for nothing more fervently than to be able to sink through the floor. All too vividly I recalled the accident in the Ventilation Factory, which had deprived me of a portion of my head-lamp!

And as this remembrance flashed through my mind, the attendant with the bit of crystal approached to within hand's grasp. "Now for the test!" he announced. "Now for the final evidence!"

Then, while I shivered and shrank from before him, and felt the hundreds of glittering pairs of eyes focused upon me like daggers, his hands reached down and I heard a clicking sound as

the piece of crystal was adjusted to my head-lamp.

"Did I not tell you?" he exclaimed, triumphantly. And thereupon all the Neuters, forgetting their dignity, crowded forward to examine. "As you value your lamps! you will observe for yourselves! It fits like a key into a lock!"

"Yes, like a key into a lock!" echoed several surprised voices. "Like a man into his own skin!"

He waved his hands before the bowl as if to hypnotize it and blew upon it solemnly.

(Illustration by Paul)

WHILE the Neuters were returning to their seats and the excitement of the audience was gradually subsiding, it seemed to me that my last moment was at hand.

It was in a grave, slow voice that the leading Neuter at length broke into speech; but I was relieved to observe that his head-lamp did not show a red flame, although there was something a little menacing in its alternate tinges of green and purple.

"Prisoner Unclassified GH 1987 A-XZ," he proclaimed, "has been proved guilty of an offense as rare as it is grave, and one that, in the case of one of our own citizens, would justify a penalty of two hundred and fifty sequons of menial labor in the Frigid Corridors. As a just court, however, we cannot sentence him as we would one of our own citizens. We must take into account mitigating circumstances, such as his lack of education and opportunities, the inferior brain with which nature has endowed him, and his natural inability to distinguish between right and wrong.

"Above all, we must consider his lack of a head-lamp, without which he is unable to find his way in dark places. It is conceivable that

his crime was committed not because of the viciousness of his nature, but because of an inborn mental and spiritual blindness. Now, as every one knows, the first maxim of jurisprudence is that we should never try to punish that which can be cured by medicine; hence the present case should perhaps be left to the physicians. So, at least, one of our colleagues contends, and I think we should hear his voice."

The speaker ended, and with a courteous gesture designated a particularly tall and slender Neuter seated just to his right.

"Yes, that is true!" confirmed this individual, in a voice that reminded me of a radio receiver being given too much volume. And, while an icy wave seemed to sweep across the room and envelop me, he continued:

"As a Neuter who has devoted six hundred sequons to the study of surgery, I have naturally developed my own theories; and the chief of these, with which most of my confreres will agree, is that all maladies, whether of the body or of the mind, can be cut out by means of the knife. Now let us consider the two prisoners. They both display an unhealthy not to say a badly diseased spiritual state, since both of them have shown a habit of killing and eating animals; while both have tried to escape our hospitality, and one has been guilty of impeding ventilation . . . . But how can we remedy all this? Suppose that we condemn them to the Intolerable Corridors for a few hundred sequons—is it likely that they will be reformed? No! to the contrary; their brains will remain at their present low level; they will not have risen above their present evil ways of thought.

"Let us therefore got to the roots of the matter, and try to remake the brains themselves. I will admit that at first sight the case will seem hopeless, but, as the records of medical science prove, imbecility is not immune to treatment. If we are able to stimulate the Superlampular Gland, which controls the head-lamps, we may yet be able to make their organs grow in a normal manner, so giving them the correct vision which they so badly need.

"The operation, I am glad to say, is a comparatively simple one. We need remove not more than about ten square inches from the lower left-hand corner of the skull, following which we will cut our way through perhaps two or three inches of the cerebral matter—"

This was as much of the speech as I was able to hear. Stark had given a low gasp and fallen half lifeless at my side; and I occupied the next two or three minutes in the effort to revive him.

But I myself was nearly in a swooning state by the time I had succeeded and could turn my attention again to proceedings in the hall.

The first thing I now observed was that the Neuters were all nodding approval of the recommendations of the surgeon, who had just taken his seat. "Well, prisoners, before we pass judgment, have you anything to say?" demanded the High Chief Persecutor. "If you know of anything that is more for your good that the sentence we are about to impose, now is your time to speak!"

DESPITE the faintness that had overwhelmed me the minute before, I managed to struggle to my feet.

"O renowned Lords," I found myself able to plead, "I do not doubt that your eminent surgeons are skilled in their profession, but in the land where I come from it is not considered wise—no, it is not even considered safe—to make incisions in the brain—"

"Not wise? Not safe?" interrupted the physician. And he laughed a sly, mocking laugh; while his head-lamp glowed faintly red. "A lamentable superstition, dear friends! A relic of the Black Ages! But perhaps the prisoners themselves are still in the Black Ages! Why, we offer both of them, free of charge, an operation that most citizens would have to pay for with half a sequon's labor! And yet they object! Was such ingratitude ever heard of before?"

At this he laughed another sly, derisive laugh; and then, slapping his knees with his tendril-like fingers, lapsed into silence.

But I, fighting down my indignation, proceeded with my appeal: "If you say that you are acting for our own good, O worthy Lords, why not let my friend and me go back to our own world? That would free you of our presence, and at the same time nothing could be more for our own good. If you wish, I will even take you up above your highest corridors, and show you the car we came down in—"

The head-lamp of our Oppressor-in-Chief gave a crimson flare. "So you still persist in your story that you come from another world?" he demanded. "How often is it necessary to tell you that science has proved there is no other world?"

Perceiving that nothing was to be gained from this line of appeal, I decided to take a different track.

"Then even if we stay in your own land," I entreated, "why cannot we remain as we are now? We would try our best to learn your laws, and to respect and obey—"

"But, by the fullness of your heads, what occupation would you pursue?" thundered the Neuter. "How do you think that men without lamps would prosper? Is there any occupation that they could follow in all the million and one corridors of the universe? Could they be engaged in the mines, where head-lamps are necessary to show the way? or in the factories, which are often without light of their own? or in the offices of government, which are usually in darkness? No, there is nothing at all that they could do! They would remain unemployed! And you know what happens to unemployed men?"

"No, great Lords, I do not know."

"Then let me inform you! There is an ancient statute, dating from remotest times—back from the Sequon 1931—which disposes of the unemployed in a simple and logical fashion. Fortunately, there have been no unemployed for ages; but the statute still exists. Since jobless persons are afflictions to themselves and burdens to society, our ancestors decided that, for humanitarian reasons, it would be well to order them all to report to the authorities, who would have them painlessly and inexpensively asphyxiated.

Thus the problem was settled in a way to please economists as well as the more tender-hearted citizens. It is perfectly possible for you, therefore, if you should prefer that fate—"

But, interrupting with an angry gesture, I hastily disclaimed any such preferences.

"Well, at least I am glad you can see the way of reason," approved the judge. "The surgical method is of course the best. You will thank us—yes, you will thank us some day when you are both useful citizens, with newly sprouting head-lamps."

"Newly sprouting head-lamps?" I exclaimed. And, with a vehemence I had not expected of myself, I stepped in a paroxysm of anger toward our judges, and waved a threatening fist. "Newly sprouting head-lamps? Stop! by the holy powers above! I warn you—I warn you not to perform the operation! I will take vengeance—on my honor as an earth-man, I will take vengeance if you insist on this crime! Go ahead—go ahead, if you like!—but misfortune will come your way!"

I do not know, nor did I know at the time, what impulse other than madness made me utter these words; nor did I anticipate, as I sank quivering into my seat, the subtle advantage the threat was to give me in days to come. For a babbling laughter sounded from the audience, and hundreds of head-lamps were lighted with an amused lavender; while the Neuters, regardless of my outburst, lost no time in deciding that, within fifteen days, Stark and I should undergo the brain operations.

CHAPTER XXIV

The Coming of the Scourge

UPON the conclusion of the trial, Stark and I were returned to our prison, where we were guarded as before by the six-legged monster with the crocodile teeth. There being no possibility of escape, we could do little except to mope in our room with oaths and curses and in miserable meditation, trying to console one another, but faced all the while with the certainty of speedy execution.

Meantime, as if to keep us from forgetting our impending fate, we received frequent visits from the surgeon who was to perform the operation, as well as from his assistants, all of whom were Neuters with exceptionally long fingers and with exceptionally cold green lights in their eyes. Almost like oxen being fattened for the slaughter, we received regular attention, and had our health tested by every device of Plutonian medicine, in order that we might be in condition for the ordeal.

If any consolation came to us during those wretched hour, it was in the trouble we gave our captors: our heartbeat impressed them as abnormally fast, and they debated using injections to retard it (since twenty a minute was considered normal on their planet); our skin-temperature struck them as unbelievably high, and they had to consult their instruments time after time before being convinced—they thought we were suffering from a raging fever, for the normal temperature of a Plutonian, as registered by our thermometers, would be about eighty-eight degrees Fahrenheit. And so Stark and I had to argue for hours to convince the physicians that we did not require compresses of ice about our heads and chests.

But this was not the worst of their difficulties. They would occupy themselves endlessly in making charts and maps of our heads; they would measure each curve and protuberance; they would take photographs with some machine resembling our X-ray but capable of representing the very convolutions of the brain. The numerous pictures produced by these instruments were searched eagerly for traces of our Superlampular Glands, which, of course, could not be located.

But did that deter the physicians from the contemplated operation? Far from it! "See how badly you need medical attention!" the Head Surgeon exclaimed, after his eleventh failure to detect any sign of our Superlampular Glands. "Your organs have actually become invisible through disuse! Fortunate for you that we will stimulate them before they disappear entirely!"

Stark and I were now under a supervision like that of children controlled by arrogant adults. One day, for example, in the course of inspecting our clothes while we disrobed for the examinations, the surgeon chanced to catch sight of the gold and precious stones I had secured in the Afflicted Regions.

"What are you doing with this trash?" he exclaimed, highly annoyed; and forthwith he flung all my treasures into a receptacle marked "Waste," from which, alas! I was never able to recover them. On another occasion, when Stark and I had determined on a hunger strike, he frustrated our efforts by having us bound and by supplying us with nourishment through hypodermic injections; and, after this bit of unpleasantness, we decided that it was unwise to attempt to cross him. But most of all he angered us by his refusal to let us see Zandaye, whom we had not beheld since the time of her condemnation, and who was the only person on this planet whose presence could have brought us some consolation.

Indeed, we did not even receive any word of Zandaye, other than the most definite assurances. "Have no fear; she is all right," we were told. "She is being taken care of . . . . It is part of her punishment not to be allowed to confer again with her partners in crime."

And so we were to pass out into the void, it seemed, without so much as another glimpse of her who, for us both, held all the gentleness and light that this world contained.

And yet fate, whose method is to burrow underground like the mole, was already scheming to make our remaining days on Pluto quite different and somewhat more bright than we had anticipated.

Slowly, slowly, yet with a speed that seemed ominously great, our hours of grace were slipping away. Already half of the allotted time, more than half of the allotted time had passed; less than a week, by earthly reckoning, was left to us—when fortune began to play antics that we

had little expected, and a gleam of hope issued from an unlooked-for direction.

ONE day, when the Head Surgeon came as usual to examine us, I noticed that from time to time his fingers would feel uneasily at his neck and throat, which seemed slightly swollen. But neither Stark nor I were particularly interested until, on the following day, we observed that three of the assistants likewise had slight swelling in the same region; while the Head Surgeon had suddenly become fantastic and grotesque of appearance. His neck, formerly of swan-like thinness, had expanded to four times its former size! His lower jaw, which had grown like a lump of dough, was a mere caricature of its original self! It was easy enough, of course, for us to see what was the matter; he had a bad case of the mumps!

Stark and I, naturally, smiled a little at the plight of our arch-enemy; and I will not say that we did not feel a malicious glee. But not until we had heard the Surgeon and his assistants discussing the malady did we realize how ironic a blow fate had dealt.

"I cannot imagine what it may be," he said, while tenderly feeling the swollen parts. "By my lamp! but it is painful! I have consulted the books; nothing like it has ever been recorded before."

"No, nothing like it has ever been recorded," acknowledged one of the others, with a puzzled scowl. "It is doubtless an abscess due to a dental infection. I should advise you to have some teeth pulled immediately."

"No, not by all my fingers!" opined a third, reflectively. "For my part, I should say it was due to some gastronomical condition. My own recommendation is that you be careful about your food for the next eight or ten days. Eat little or nothing, and preferably go on a liquid diet."

"By no means, by no means!" disagreed a third, sharply. "A sufficiency of food, according to all authorities, is the first necessity in such a case! It is clearly a nervous condition, brought on by overwork and fatigue, which have induced an irritation of the membro-spinal nerve. My suggestion is freedom from worry, and rest, accompanied, if possible, by a change of scenery."

Overhearing this conversation, Stark and I could not help laughing a little to ourselves. Nor could we refrain from laughing openly when by degrees we came to realize the situation. "Why, it seems they've never had any mumps before on Pluto!" my companion whispered to me, after the first second of bewilderment; and from this it was not difficult to come to the conclusion, "Heavens! they must have caught it from us! We must have brought the germ here with us, in our bodies or on our clothing!"

"Lucky we're immune to the disease ourselves! Remember, we both had it when we were ten-year-olds!" I exclaimed. "They must have taken it because of their close contact with us during the medical examinations!"

As this thought came to us, we had our first really happy moment since our trial; for destiny, it seemed to us, was avenging us handsomely for the wrongs we had suffered.

Yet the vengeance was only at its beginning. On the following day, the Head Surgeon did not present himself at all; but three of his assistants, who did appear, all had faces like balloons while three others displayed small swellings that seemed to us to hold excellent promise. The examination that morning was a very brief one; and from the way our visitors rubbed and rubbed their faces and occasionally sighed and groaned, it was apparent that none of them were in too comfortable a state . . . .

After another day, all of our attendants alike exhibited faces swollen to fantastic lumps. The chin of one was muffled in heavy bandages; a second was covered with long strips and bands of a substance like court plaster; a third had applied some oily unguent to the afflicted parts; a fourth had tried ice, and a fifth had attempted treatment by red-hot cloths; while all alike complained of their plight incessantly, asking each other what the disease might be and whether it were likely to prove fatal. Most of them, after a long consultation, seemed in favor of removing the trouble by operating; but their plans, apparently, came to nothing, for while all were willing to undertake incisions upon their fellows, none would consent to be the subject of the experiment.

It amused Stark and me to observe that, while they did not hesitate to hold their debates in our presence, they paid no heed at all to us, and much less thought of consulting us—although we might have told them more than a little about the mysterious malady.

The Game Begins

IT is fortunate that we did not enlighten them, for we would then have lost a powerful weapon. But that is to anticipate; Stark and I still did not realize that destiny had done more than to take an irrelevant revenge upon our foes. As yet were not able to perceive any loophole of escape; we still expected that the knives of the operators would take their toll; for time still continued to slip past, and the fateful operation was scheduled to occur within sixty hours. And how little we anticipated the changes that those sixty hours were to bring!

Being shut off from the world in our single guarded room, we of course knew nothing of the events agitating the rest of the planet. But after another day or two—when only twenty hours remained of our allotted span of life—sudden realization was to burst upon us. One of our attendants, perhaps rendered careless by a bad case of the mumps, chanced to leave a copy of the *Daily Neuter* in our prison; and Stark and I, as might have been expected, seized the paper and scanned the contents with as must interest as was possible for men who have only one day more to live.

What was our surprise when we found the whole front page devoted to one subject!—a subject that peculiarly concerned us! "MYSTERIOUS PLAGUE SWEEPS THE WORLD" we read in headlines. "Scientists Still Unable to Check

Ravages.- And, following this announcement, we saw an article in large type:

"The mysterious plague which has been sweeping the world for several days still rages unabated. It seems to be spreading in wide circles from a central focus, and each hour thousands of new sufferers are being listed by the Supervisor of Public Health. The symptoms, which are unparalleled in medical records, are featured by a violent and painful swelling in the region of the neck and chin, which in some instances grow to several times their normal size.

"Worst of all, in severe cases, the head-lamps have frequently been affected, and have been unable to shed beams of normal brilliancy. It is not known how many of the sufferers will recover, but already more than three hundred deaths have occurred, of which over half have been among Neuters. Millions not yet stricken by the disease are fleeing in a panic from the affected regions, bringing business to a standstill and threatening a tie-up of scientific activity, of transportation, and of the Synthetic Food Factories. But, at the date of this writing, no method has been discovered for checking the epidemic.

"The most singular feature of the pestilence is that it has occurred simultaneously among so many people, almost as though one had conveyed it to another—a method of transmission which, according to physicians, is impossible. In their efforts to explain the incredible, some persons say that the victims unconsciously set up vicious waves in the air, which impinge upon the bodies of their neighbors and affect them with the malady.

"Still others claim that the sufferers throw off base humors, which, settling on the skins of their friends, cause the disease to sprout from fungus-like spores. Others, again, being of a devout turn of mind, contend that our people have gone so far in the way of iniquity that the Creator is issuing a judgment upon them . . . .

"But a still more striking theory is rapidly gaining credence in some quarters. It is pointed out that the plague made its original appearance in the vicinity of the two man-like creatures, known as the Lampless Ones, who came no one can say where from, and whose ways are monstrous and inexplicable. It is pointed out, also, that one of these creatures, upon being promised an operation which would cause his lamp to grow, was so far from appreciating the proferred benefaction that he fell into a fit of anger, and made fiery promises of vengeance.

"Of course, no one at first took such ravings seriously; but observers are now asking whether it was by a mere coincidence that the Head Surgeon, who was to have performed the operation, was the first to be stricken, while his assistants followed in short order. Is it not possible, investigators are asking, that the Lampless Ones deliberately infected the Head Surgeon with some secret poison which the victim would communicate unknowingly to whomever he might touch? In that case, would there be any way of preventing the spread of the pestilence without the aid of the Lampless Ones?"

IT is hardly necessary to state that this article proved a revelation to Stark and myself. Breathlessly, with staring eyes, we re-read the account, wondering whether we could have misconstrued the meaning; then, while not yet realizing fully the possibilities before us, we turned to one another as exultantly as dying men who see an unexpected hope.

"So!" exclaimed Stark. "It's not only that the mumps were never known in this world before! It's that no contagious disease was ever known!"

"Apparently not!" I concurred. "Evidently bacteria have never been discovered here!"

"Well, surely, it's not up to us to educate the people," he continued, brushing back the newly sprouting mat of hair that was overrunning his glass head-lamp. "Our best course will be to pretend we did it all deliberately."

"Let them think I carried out that threat of mine!" I took up the argument. "Let them believe we have some secret power! Let them imagine we can end the plague as easily as we started it! In that case, how can they risk killing us in an operation?"

"Yes, how can they? But the trouble is, the operation is such a short distance away!" groaned Stark. "We'll have to work fast—terribly fast!—if we're still to be alive tomorrow at this time!"

For the next hour, the two of us might have been observed in a sly, whispered conversation. Sometimes we would be absorbed with a seriousness that would bring the wrinkles to our brows; sometimes we might have been noticed to chuckle furtively; occasionally we would sit beaming at one another with radiant hopefulness. . . . And the result of our conference was a plot which, at the first opportunity, we began to put into operation.

That opportunity arrived with the entry of two attendants, equipped with machines for registering our blood-pressure and heart-beat for the last time before the operation. We observed that their faces were already swollen with incipient cases of the mumps; and we took advantage of that fact in executing our scheme.

"Put down your instruments," I surprised them by directing, in a calm but determined voice. "You are not to take any measurements today. We will not allow the operation to be performed. If you so much as touch us—yes, so much as let your hands rest on ours!—we will inject a venom into your veins. As a result, you will die in agony of the new disease, which is called—"

"Which is called the Bloated Neck," finished Stark for me, on an inspiration.

The two attendants stared at us with head-lamps of a sudden yellow. But neither of them made a motion to approach us.

"It is we that have brought the disease into existence," I proceeded. "It is we alone that can end it. Think of it as our protest against the operations which you propose to perform on us against our will. If you still attempt to perform those operations, then your world will never, never be able to deliver itself from the pestilence!"

The two Plutonians stood peering at us with

small mouths agape; while each second their head-lamps seemed to burn to a deeper yellow.

"But, Lampless Ones—honored Lampless Ones," faltered one of the attendants, with a respect he had never displayed before, "it is not we that are to blame. We are acting under orders from higher authority. The Head Surgeon has instructed us to—"

"Then we must speak with the Head Surgeon!" I demanded. "Tell him to come here! Tell him we must see him at once!"

"Very well—very well, honored Lampless Ones," conceded the attendant. "But do you not know how hard it is for any one to get speech with the Head Surgeon?"

Even as he uttered these words, he grasped the arm of his fellow, with whom he began to retreat from the room as rapidly as if it had been infested with serpents. As he vanished, I noticed that his head-lamp gave a particularly vivid yellow sparkle.

Stark and I had not long to wait for the next act in the drama. It could not have been more than twenty minutes before we heard hasty footsteps from without, and several Neuters entered, among them the Head Surgeon.

An Agreement

HE was looking unusually pale and wan even for a Plutonian, and the bulges on his chin and neck showed that he was still far from having recovered from the mumps.

"What is this nonsense I hear?" he burst forth, as he entered the room; and had his voice not indicated anger, the red glow on his head would have amply suggested it. "By my lamp! I am told you refuse to prepare for the operation!"

"You are told correctly," I said. "We propose to remain without head-lights."

The Surgeon uttered something that may have been a curse; but, not being sufficiently versed in Plutonian profanity, I cannot say positively.

"And why, pray, this presumption?" he demanded, in tones tinged with irony. "Do you think you will make better citizens if you cannot find your way in the dark?"

"Do you think *you* will make a better citizen if you go about with the Bloated Neck?" I retorted.

Our adversary stared at us with eyes that were little more than two penetrating points of greenish fire. "I do not understand what that has to do with the proposed operations," he declared, crisply.

As briefly as I could, I explained what I had already explained to the attendant, as to the cause of the Bloated Neck and its probable duration.

He listened with angry flames of his head-lamp, but without any evidence of surprise. "Well, so that is what you say?" he challenged, when I had finished. "But am I to believe it? What proof have you that you are really responsible for the disease?"

"Did I not threaten to take vengeance if you insisted on the operation?" I flung back, fiercely.

"And have you observed," added Stark, "that either my friend or I have taken the Swollen Neck? How does that happen, when every one else around us has been stricken? Do you not suppose we know ways to protect ourselves?"

A long silence followed this question, and I saw that we had scored. The Head Surgeon turned to his fellows, and they nodded to him significantly . . . . apparently more than half convinced. "Yes, how does it happen that the Lampless Ones have not taken the disease?" they whispered. But he had no response to make.

"You shall see that we never shall take the disease," I proceeded. "You shall also see that, if you deal with us rightly, we can show you how to treat the trouble, so that in time it will disappear from your world. Otherwise, there will be no relief."

Another long silence followed. The Head Surgeon conferred in whispers with his companions, so that we could catch only occasional words and phrases, such as "Public danger," "Wrong to take any chances," "Peril to our lamps," and one or two other expressions of similar import.

At last the surgeon turned to us abruptly, and demanded, "Well, just what is it that you want us to do?"

"Call off the operations!" returned Stark and I, in one voice.

He screwed up his thin lips solemnly, and tenderly stroked the swollen parts of his neck.

"That is impossible," he announced. "It would require the sanction of the Head Neuter and the Governing Council, who control the world's affairs, and who have been informed of the approaching operations and inscribed them on the Books of State. To be sure, if you should request it, we might make an appeal—"

"How long would an appeal require?"

THE Surgeon hesitated. "Well, with luck," he finally ventured, "we might have our answer within three days."

Stark and I groaned. "But, by that time, the operations would be over!"

"To be sure," nodded the Surgeon. "But, at least, you would have the satisfaction of knowing whether they were legally justified."

"What if the operations were to be postponed?" my companion demanded. "Would that not be legal?"

"No, by my lamp, strictly illegal!"

"Strictly illegal!" repeated several decisive voices. "Absolutely unheard of!"

"Then long may the Bloated Neck remain among you!" I flared.

And this sentiment was echoed vigorously by Stark.

Another long silence ensued, followed by a second whispered conference among the Neuters, whose head-lamps displayed many a telltale yellow spark.

Then once more the Head Surgeon turned to us, and, with a brighter expression on his face, declared:

"My assistants and I think we have found a way. While it is illegal and rightly punishable, as we have stated, to postpone an operation deliberately, it is not illegal or punishable in the least

to postpone it unintentionally. Now what if my colleagues and I should decide to postpone it unintentionally? We could prove that we were too severely stricken by the new disease to be able to wield a knife. In that way we might delay the operation for several days, and in the meanwhile your appeal might be heard by the Head Neuter and his Council. Would that satisfy you?"

"Perfectly," acknowledged Stark and I, delighted that our prospective term of life had been lengthened for at least a day or two.

"Then we shall try to act accordingly," promised the Head Surgeon, gravely.

But the next instant, when I stepped forward to seize his hand in token of appreciation, he started back as if I intended to strike him. And all his fellows shrank from contact with me as though I had been a leper; while the spectacle they made as they hastily retreated from the room reminded me of a fireworks exhibition in yellow.

CHAPTER XXV

The Hall of the Rose-Red Light

INSTEAD of being taken to the operating room on the following morning, Stark and I received orders to appear before the Head Neuter.

In the company of several attendants, all of whom displayed well developed cases of the Bloated Neck, and all of whom kept us at as great a distance as though we had belonged to some "untouchable" caste, we were escorted hundreds of miles on an expedition of several hours. During the course of our journey, we made some interesting observations, chiefly to the effect that the epidemic had spread far more thoroughly than we had guessed.

Here and there we passed galleries crowded with lamp-heads, of whom the great majority exhibited bulging necks and chins, while many were bandaged with heavy cloths, and not a few were groaning and wailing in utmost distress. All ages alike were affected: tottering old Neuters, as well as children who reached but little above my knees; and all alike seemed to regard us as the source of their affliction, for they would point to us with angry jeers and cries, and in some cases, when their head-lamps were swollen and burned but poorly, they would indicate those organs with pitiful lamentations and deluge us with curses impossible to repeat.

Now and then we were even threatened with physical violence, and were only saved by the popular dread of physical contact with us. But we were not so fortunate when a group of half-grown urchins conceived the idea of attacking us with stones. Despite the protests of our attendants, who, we could see, were secretly in sympathy with the assailants, we were the targets of a savage bombardment, and had a lively time dodging showers of rocks, some of them as big as our fists.

Only when we proved ourselves capable of seizing the rocks in our turn and hurling them back with damaging force did the assault show any signs of relaxing; and, even so, we were lucky to escape without serious injury. Only one casualty was suffered on our side: a heavy stone, the last one flung by our enemies, chanced to catch me on what remained of my crystal head-lamp, shattering it to fragments and momentarily stunning me. A moment later, we had escaped through a little door into a side-gallery; while behind us rang loud whoops of victory.

Most of our trip, fortunately, was accomplished upon movable platforms that took us far from the rabble; and so the battle was not renewed, although we realized that henceforth—so long as we remained on Pluto—we would live only as aliens.

Consequently, we were relieved when at last our journey was over. Passing through a great triangular doorway surmounted by the sign, "Head Neuter," we were bidden to wait in an octagonal room with translucent walls of some substance like amber. "His Ruling Eminence is engaged in a conference just now," we were informed. "But if you will wait in the anteroom, he will see you when he is at leisure."

Having no choice, we took seats on the floor, while our attendants ranged themselves near the doorway as if to preclude our escape. Minute after minute now went by, during which we did nothing but shift uneasily from place to place and beat time upon our knees. It seemed as if our turn never was to come; as if we had been ordered here only that we might be tantalized; for the minutes merged into hours, and still we had not been called.

Then, when my impatience had become such that I had arisen and was pacing the floor like a watchman, I heard the sound of voices from an inner room, a door swung open, and a weeping woman with a yellow head-light and bandaged face emerged.

At first, in my astonishment, I failed to recognize her. But it was only a moment before I had cried out, in tune with Stark, "Zandaye! Zandaye!"

Startled at hearing her name, she looked up from swollen red-lidded eyes, and with an exclamation of surprise and joy ran to us, giving one hand impulsively to each.

"Zandaye! Zandaye!" we ejaculated, together. "What—what are you doing here? What has happened to you?"

She glanced about her furtively, as if to make sure that none of the attendants were overhearing; then, in whispers, confided, "Oh, my friends, my friends, I am in trouble! The Head Neuter has just called me to see him! By my lamp, but we have had a long conference! It was all about you! He—he threatens—terrible penalties—unless I tell him all I know! He thinks that I, having been with you so long, know how you caused this—this horrible neck disease. You see, I have been stricken with it myself. I told him you had not caused it at all, but he would not believe me!"

"YOU should not have told him that, Zandaye," I remonstrated; and then, seeing her bewildered look, stopped suddenly short.

"Never mind, Zandaye," promised Stark, while desperately she tried to dry away the last trace

of her tears, "we will protect you. We will speak to the Head Neuter—"

It was at this point that a booming voice thundered from the unseen—no doubt from some concealed radio receiver: "His Ruling Eminence, the Head Neuter, is in waiting, along with Their Distinguished Excellencies, the Governing Council. The two Lampless Ones will now step forward, following the green arrow into the Audience Chamber."

As these words died out, half of the wall to our right slid open, revealing a winding gallery whose existence we had not even suspected. Upon the floor a huge flaming green arrow was visible; and this we followed hastily, after bidding a hurried farewell to Zandaye, who watched us with dismal eyes as we nodded and vanished from view.

After threading our way through numbers of intricate passages, in which we would certainly have been lost had it not been for the green arrow, Stark and I climbed a long flight of stairs and emerged trembling into a hall suffused with an eerie rose-red light. We were wondering whether, after all, we had not gone astray, when a voice from the invisible exclaimed, "You will now lift your left hands three times in token of respect for His Ruling Eminence, the Head Neuter, and Their Distinguished Excellencies, the Governing Council."

As we performed the required ceremony, we noticed a queer-looking pyramidal marble stand, about twelve or fifteen feet high, which towered near one end of the hall. At its apex sat an individual with a particularly brilliant head-lamp and with a head of three times the ordinary size; just beneath him stared several empty benches; while on seats ranged at different heights along the pyramid sat six or eight big-headed Neuters, who, I must admit, did not present a particularly dignified appearance. Indeed, several of them were nodding and tossing in the clasp of a sound sleep; while the faces of all alike displayed huge unsightly lumps and swellings.

The individual on the highest seat, alone of all the group, had not contracted the Bloated Neck; and it impressed me at once that he looked like a ruler, as, suffused in a rosy glow, and clad only in the long, diaphanous, gauze streamers that hung from his head-lamp, he returned our salutation by raising his left hand twice, and then solemnly motioned us to approach.

Was it surprising that our hearts leapt into our throats as we drew near this personage who held our fate in his hands? True, he was not strikingly different to the outer eye from hundreds of other Plutonians; but the inner eye, perceiving the power that he wielded, translated that power at once into magnificence, with which he was properly invested. And so we could not have shuddered more violently had we been summoned to the throne of great Jove himself.

"Greetings, Lampless Ones!" he exclaimed, when at last we stood beneath him, staring up somewhat as a small dog stares at its master. "I have called you here today on a most serious matter. You may judge of its importance when I tell you that, in order to see you without delay, I had to postpone a meeting of the Inter-Neuter Political League, which is intrusted with the duty of choosing the candidates for both sides in our elections. What was even more regrettable, I had to miss the Three Hundredth Sequonal meeting of the Society to Reform the Afflicted Regions, of which I am one of the Honorary Vice Secretaries. Well, duty before pleasure is the Neuter motto; and so I have sent for you, since I find my subordinates too panic-stricken to perform a simple operation upon your heads. This was the proposed date of the operation, was it not?"

We both nodded.

"I thought so! Then, by my lamp, let us get to the point!"

The Challenge!

SUDDENLY his manner became brisk and business-like, and he sat up almost with military erectness; while his voice assumed such thunder and volume that several of his associates, aroused from their slumbers, sat up abruptly and rubbed their eyes sleepily before dozing off again.

"As you say," he continued, "the operation was to have been performed today. Assuredly, it should have been performed, for the crimes and blunders you have committed can only be explained by the emotional blankness and the mental derangements due to the lack of a lamp. But now comes the most serious charge of all. It is said you have deliberately spread a horrible scourge, which swells the neck and sometimes dims the head-lamp! If this be true, then it is doubtful whether an operation would cure you; indeed, whether it would not be best to submit you to the process of Fiery Annihilation—a punishment rarely applied, but never known to fail.

"However, I do not believe you guilty of spreading the new disease. I attribute the charges to the ignorance, the credulity, the prejudice of the masses. Moreover, one of your friends, whom I have just interviewed, assures me that you are in no way responsible. But before dismissing the case and sending you back to the operating-room, I should like to hear from your own lips a denial of the accusations!"

The Head Neuter brought seven long fingers down upon his bare knee with a slap that disturbed the Governing Council once more in their slumbers; then, folding his arms in an attitude of waiting, he sat peering down at us for several long embarrassing seconds, until Stark, in a wavering voice, made bold to speak:

"I am sorry, Your Ruling Eminence, but who am I to deny the truth? My friend and I, being men of honor, will not combat the accusations."

The Head Neuter shot far forward in his seat, and his great greenish eyes flashed and sparkled with an angry fire.

"What?" he roared. "You will not combat the accusations? By your lampless skulls! then you mean to say you have been guilty?—guilty of the most monstrous crimes?"

"We have been guilty," testified Stark, with increasing assurance, "of starting and spreading the disease known as the Bloated Neck."

Suddenly the seven fingers of the Neuter's

powerful right hand were clenched, and drove forward with the force of a battering-ram.

"This is preposterous!" he bellowed. "You do not know what you say! Why, have you even considered the penalty? You lay yourselves open to the doom of Fiery Annihilation? And, by the holy head-lamp of my father, that is what you will suffer—yes, that is what you will suffer unless it be proved you are speaking mere windy words!"

"I am not speaking mere windy words," insisted Stark.

"No, Your Ruling Eminence," I verified, "he is not speaking mere windy words."

"Then Fiery Annihilation will be the reward of you both!"

"I am sorry, but I do not think so," Stark denied, while several members of the Governing Council, newly aroused, yawned and stared at him with their first show of interest. "Surely, you will not annihilate the only men who know how to deliver you from the Bloated Neck."

"How do I know you can deliver us from the Bloated Neck?"

"If we spread the pestilence, we can also relieve it," my friend asserted. "Without us, you will find no way to save yourselves."

"Besides," I added, on an inspiration, "if you do not cure the disease, it will grow worse by its very nature. Some of your people, to be sure, will recover, but they will fall victims to it again and again. After a while, it will disfigure most of you, and also injure or destroy your head-lamps."

The Head Neuter groaned. Several members of the Governing Council did likewise, and a yellow glitter came into their lamps. And as if by instinct their leader felt for his luminary before, in a wrathful voice, he continued:

"What is that you say? What diabolical threat is this you make? Truly, Lampless Ones, as some of our scientists have testified, you cannot be even half human—otherwise, how could you dream of such criminal speech? Have you thought of the defenseless millions of Neuters and children? But no!—by the brilliance of my head-light! you cannot think at all! And everything that you say is an idle threat!"

Into Stark's eyes there had come a sudden ironic twinkling. "Idle threat?" he repeated, in low vibrant tones. "Perhaps you will say so when, for sequons and sequons to come, you will see millions groaning and distorted with the Bloated Neck. But maybe you would like a little proof? If you see that I can cause the Bloated Neck, will you be convinced that I can cure it?"

"YES, by my lamp, I will be convinced!" thundered the Head Neuter, swinging his long lithe body so far forward that I feared he would topple out of his seat and come tumbling down upon us. "But how, in the name of all bright-shining heads, can you cause the disease?"

"That I will gladly show," Stark proceeded, while I wondered what on earth he could be planning. "It will, however, be necessary for you to perform a few simple acts that I will suggest, and after that you must wait a few days for the effects. If you will consent to this much—"

"I will consent to anything reasonable!" vowed the Head Neuter; but his greenish eyes had an incredulous gleam. "What is it that you propose?"

"First of all, summon a few of your people who have not been affected with the Bloated Neck. Five or six will be enough."

The Head Neuter scowled. "Five or six people who have not been affected with the Bloated Neck will be difficult to find," he ruminated. "A hasty census has shown that not one in a thousand has escaped. I myself have been one of the fortunate few—which doubtless is because the Powers Above wish to protect me, whom the people need to lead them. . . . However, since you desire to show that you can cause the disease, it seems reasonable to begin on those who have never had it. You will therefore retire for a while, and I will send out scouts to find some persons who have escaped. With luck, you will be called back within a few hours."

The Head Neuter lifted his left hand in token of our dismissal, and the members of the Governing Council yawned and settled back to sleep once more. And Stark and I, passing out through a door that opened automatically to receive us, followed a red arrow through a long passageway to the anteroom where we had waited before.

At the first opportunity, I whispered a pertinent question into Stark's ear; and he chuckled by way of reply, and whispered back something that made me also chuckle. "Do you think it will work?" he concluded, with an expressive gleam in his great blue eyes. "Personally, I don't see how the scheme can fail."

"Neither can I," I returned; and, chuckling once more, I congratulated my friend on what seemed to me to be an ingenious plan.

It was only about two hours later when a voice from the invisible roared the announcement that His Ruling Eminence, the Head Neuter, again desired to see us.

Accordingly, we wasted no time about following the green arrow in company of several attendants, and within a few minutes stood again in the rose-hued hall beneath the pyramidal throne.

"Well, Lampless Ones," bawled the Head Neuter, after we had performed the expected ceremony with our left hands, "I have secured six persons unaffected by the Bloated Neck. Shall I call them?"

"If you please, Your Ruling Eminence," acquiesced Stark. And thereupon the Head Neuter signalled to an attendant, who signalled to another attendant, who signalled to a third attendant; following which a door slipped open, and six ordinary-looking Plutonians, untouched by disease, entered the hall with head-lamps of an intense yellow.

"Your Ruling Eminence, I found these individuals only after great difficulty," testified an attendant. "None of them wished to come, but I assured them all that the welfare of the State may depend upon their presence."

"So it may!" acknowledged the Head Neuter.

"And now, Lampless Ones, will you advise me what to do next?"

"Certainly, Your Ruling Eminence," asserted Stark. "Will you now order a bowl of any kind of liquid food, with a tube to drink from?"

The head-lamp of the Neuter showed a sudden crimson hue. His eyes burned with an intense, baleful green. "Lampless Ones," he cried, bringing his great fist down angrily upon his knee, "I will not be made sport of! I have told you I will listen to any reasonable request! But this request, certainly, is not reasonable!"

"If Your Ruling Eminence will only do as I say, he will find it to be most reasonable," promised Stark. "What harm can there be in getting a small bowl of food?"

"What harm, indeed?" echoed one of the members of the Governing Council, who, at the mention of food, showed the first real interest he had yet manifested.

With a snarling reluctance, the Head Neuter assented, "Very well, then. It shall be as you say. But I warn you—as I value my lamp, Fiery Annihilation will not be the worst you have to fear if you are taking my good nature in vain!"

A few minutes later, a bowl of a soup-like fluid was brought in, along with one of the tubes by means of which the Plutonians were accustomed to eating.

AT the sight of these objects, the Governing Council sat up alertly; while the Head Neuter sarcastically barked, "All right, Lampless Ones! Here is your dinner! Now what do you propose to do? Eat it?"

"By no means," denied Stark. "Watch carefully, everyone." And he reached down, muttered to me in English, "We've got to do this well—our last chance depends on it"; then waved his hands before the bowl as if to hypnotize it, and blew upon it solemnly and ceremoniously three times; following which he ostentatiously took a sip of the food.

A silence had fallen upon the assemblage; all looked on with head-lamps that had flashed to an orange of surprise; but no one uttered a word.

"And now, Your Ruling Eminence," added Stark, "I have one or two simple requests still to make. I wonder, will one of the Distinguished Excellencies be so good as to take a sip of this food?"

"By my lamp, why not?" cried the Head Neuter, with a scowl of vast disapproval. "Why not? When did I ever dictate what the Distinguished Excellencies may eat?"

"Personally, I think we should oblige the Lampless Ones," volunteered one of the Governing Council, whose face was bulging from a particularly severe attack of the mumps. And, without further ceremony, he reached down, took the tube between his lips, and drained a long draught.

"Now," continued Stark, while the Head Neuter still scowled down upon us, will one of the persons without the Bloated Neck take a sip?"

Since the Head Neuter did not positively forbid, the tube was passed to one of the newcomers, who, never suspecting our plot—since nothing was known on Pluto regarding contagious diseases or their transmission—took a sip without asking that the tube be washed or even wiped.

Then once more a member of the Governing Council was asked to drink; then one of the persons without the Bloated Neck, and so again and again until the entire half dozen had had every chance to be infected.

"Now if Your Ruling Eminence will wait about six or seven days," declared Stark, after the ceremonies were all over, "you will find that all the individuals you have called here today have been taken with the Bloated Neck."

The reply of the Head Neuter was an incredulous smile, accompanied by a lavender flash.

"Lampless Ones," he mocked, "I thought you would try to show us a real trick. I thought you would not do something utterly silly. How can a man take Bloated Neck simply by tasting everyday food? Here! it is all so senseless I will show you how little there is to it! I will taste the food myself!"

And, to our surprise, the Head Neuter ordered that the bowl be brought up to him; whereupon he tasted the food by means of the same tube that all the others had used.

"Now, Lampless Ones," he concluded, "this will prove how foolish you have been. I will wait seven days, as you ask; then, if the Bloated Neck be not found among those of us who did not have it before, there will be proof enough that you are impostors and did not cause the disease. In that case, I swear, by the brilliance of my lamp, I will order the physicians immediately to perform the operations to give you the light!"

With these words, the Head Neuter once more laughed a skeptical laugh; and then, with lamp again lavender-hued, beckoned to the attendants to lead us back to prison.

CHAPTER XXVI

His Ruling Eminence Proclaims

AFTER another week amid the monotony of our guarded room, Stark and I were again summoned before the Head Neuter.

Our first glimpse of that official, as we entered the rose-hued hall, showed us that not all had gone well with him. He had lost much of his former majesty; his face was swathed in huge bandages that did not quite conceal the grotesque swellings of the chin and neck; while his head-lamp had swollen to double its normal size and at the same time had been dimmed to half its normal brilliancy.

It is not surprising, accordingly, that he was not in a very good humor; that he called out, "Greetings, Lampless Ones!" in a voice that was like a snarl, and glared at us with morose greenish eyes that looked as if they would like to devour us.

The seats on the pyramidal throne, we observed, were now mostly vacant; only two or three members of the Governing Council were present; while, as if to replace the absent members of the Council, several persons were ranged in a semi-circle on the floor beneath the throne. And these we recognized with difficulty as the individuals on whom Stark had tried his experi-

ment. But how changed they were!—one and all were nursing enormous bulging chins and cheeks!

"You see, Lampless Ones," growled the Head Neuter, when the two of us had come to a respectful halt beneath him, "you see now what you have done! Evil piled on evil! By the light of my head! what do you mean by infecting all these poor people with this loathsome disease? Yes, and what do you mean by giving it to me?—me, on whom the burden of the whole world rests? Do you not realize what you have done? One who attacks the person of the Head of the State is guilty of an attack on the State itself!—and an attack on the State is punished by a doom a thousand times worse than Fiery Annihilation!"

Stark and I, exchanging meaningful glances, were beginning to lose the jubilation we had felt at the success of our plan.

"The person of the Head of the State is sacred!" continued the Neuter, after pausing long enough to rub his swollen face tenderly. "You do not know how this accursed disease hurts! I have not decided what penalty to order, Lampless Ones, but you will not go free with a mere operation! No operation could cure depravity such as yours!"

"Your Ruling Eminence," pleaded Stark, "are you not forgetting the experiment you consented to have me perform? I promised to infect six persons with the Bloated Neck, and have I not done so? But I did not intend to include you. It was you yourself, remember, who drank from the common bowl without consulting me—"

"Who are you, that I have to consult you?" shouted the Head Neuter, in a strained and husky voice.

"But if Your Ruling Eminence had consulted me, you would not now have the Bloated Neck," continued Stark, unperturbed. "And if you will still consult me, you will be cured of the disease, and all your people will be cured. Just as my friend and I have started the pestilence, so we can end it."

"How?" demanded the Head Neuter, poking his long thin body forward like a leaning tower. "By my lamp, how can you end it?"

"That is what I want to show. After making the cure, I will explain my method. But first I must be free to act. I must have your word of honor as Head Neuter that my friend and I will not be operated on or punished."

"By all the powers of darkness, you have your impudence!" wailed the Head Neuter. "Not operated on or punished? After the crimes you have committed?"

"You have our terms," shrugged Stark.

For a moment, the Head Neuter remained wrapped in a thoughtful silence. His headlamp, enfeebled by disease, showed a pale red tinged with yellow; his hand felt appraisingly for his swollen face, and he groaned involuntarily as he touched a tender part. Then, still glaring at us with those hostile green eyes, he grumbled:

"Well, by rights, Lampless Ones, both of you should be left to hang in a pit of burning sulphur for a thousand sequons. Such a fate would be less than you deserve. Yet, for the sake of my people, I may forget my personal grievances and treat even with traitors. So you say that you can cure us all of the Bloated Neck, and that the disease will never return?"

"That is what I say, Your Ruling Eminence."

"How long would this take?"

Stark hesitated. "That depends, Your Ruling Eminence, on whether you will carry out a few necessary requests. If so, I can promise that, in seven days, the disease will begin to disappear throughout the land, while after twice seven days there will be no trace of it left."

"AND what are the requests that you make?" demanded the Head Neuter.

"They are not many, Your Ruling Eminence, but they are very important. First I ask that, during the next seven days, my friend and I be free to roam anywhere in the world."

"Granted!" snapped the Head Neuter. "Naturally, you must be free to go where you will in order to end the disease. But, in that case, some one must be appointed to accompany you."

"Very well, Your Ruling Eminence," assented Stark. "I ask that we travel in the company of one of our former tutors, a female named Zandaye—"

"Zandaye!" interrupted the Head Neuter, with a scowl. "Zandaye Zandippar! Yes, I remember her! Very stout person, is she not, with the oddest red lips and blue eyes? She has already had training enough in Pre-Neuterhood to make an excellent guide—so, if you want her, I think she will serve as well as any."

With these words, the Head Neuter signalled to one of the attendants standing in the rear. "Send out a call for Demoted Pre-Neuter Zandaye Zandippar," he shouted a husky command . . . "At once. Tell her it is my wish."

"Now one thing more, Your Ruling Eminence," I requested, after the attendant had retired. "This Pre-Neuter, Zandaye, was unjustly dishonored not long ago. I therefore ask you to remove all shadow of disgrace from her and restore her to Pre-Neuterhood."

The scowl that darkened the face of the Head Neuter was terrible to see. One of his great seven-fingered hands reached out angrily, and waved before me in a savage demonstration. "Now Lampless One, what can all that have to do with you?" he demanded. "How can the honor or dishonor of this Zandaye help you to overcome the Bloated Neck?"

"Your Ruling Eminence," I pleaded, "do I need to explain that Zandaye can be of most use to us if she works with an untroubled mind? I assure you, this is indispensable. . . If you will not consent, we can do nothing about the Bloated Neck."

"Oh, very well then!" groaned the Head Neuter. And after a moment's hesitation, during which he glowered at us as if to say that our last moment was at hand, he summoned another attendant, who procured a long sheet of parchment-like paper, on which several sentences were written with a flourish, to be followed by the signature of the Head Neuter.

"We will give her this when she comes," he declared. . . "And now, Lampless Ones, I suppose you have asked everything you wish?"

"No, Your Ruling Eminence," Stark surprised me by saying. "There is just one trifle more. When my friend and I came among your people, we had some clothes which were not as those worn here; and these clothes were taken from us, and we have not seen them since. Unfortunately, I had concealed in them some powders powerful against the Bloated Neck. Therefore if you will but send for these garments—"

"Send for these garments?" interrupted the Head Neuter. "That will not be easy. After being shipped to our chemical laboratories for analysis, they have been placed behind glass cases in museums, where they are still on exhibition. The directors of the museums will not gladly consent to releasing such curiosities. Is it essential to have them?"

"Absolutely essential!" averred Stark.

"Absolutely!" I coincided, realizing what forethought my friend had been displaying. "But after the seven days, we will return them to you."

"Then, by my lamp, if it must be, I suppose it must!" sighed His Ruling Eminence. "But I am not anxious to antagonize the directors of the museums, who are all Neuters of high standing."

Without delay, however, he summoned another attendant, and muttered an order that had to do with "Strange clothes of the Lampless Ones"...

At the same time, we were bidden to return to the anteroom; and there for several hours we could do nothing but wait. But, upon being called back into the presence of the Head Neuter, we found that our patience had not been in vain: two great fur coats lay on a rumpled heap on the floor just beneath the Neuter's throne. The fur had been singed or clipped off in a few places, and parts of the collars had been slit into ribbons; yet apparently the garments had not lost their usefulness.

"Greetings, Lampless Ones!" growled His Ruling Eminence, as we performed the reqquired rites with our left hands. "Here are the costumes you asked for. Unsightly as they are, may they give you joy and length of sequons! I am afraid I have made enemies for life of the directors of the museums—but, by the sooty light of their heads, that can't be helped!"

HE had hardly finished examining the fur coats when an attendant approached to announce the arrival of Zandaye.

"Tell her to come here at once!" directed the Head Neuter. And so, within a few minutes, we again saw our friend. Her face, we were glad to observe, was no longer bandaged, and she seemed almost to have recovered from the mumps; but her eyes were downcast as she entered, and when she noticed us it was with a shock of surprise; while her head-lamp showed a deep yellow glow.

"Greetings, Zandaye Zandippar!" cried the Head Neuter, after she had performed the salutations with her left hand. "Do not be disturbed at being summoned today. I have good news for you. Rare and undeserved good news. Attendants, will you show her the official proclamation?"

The long parchment-like paper, with the signature of the Head Neuter, was accordingly placed in Zandaye's hands. Her thin form reeled as her eyes raced along the contents; she gave a gasp of incredulous surprise, and might have fallen in a swoon to the floor had not two attendants rushed to her assistance.

"Why, I—I—Ruling Eminence, what have I done to earn this?" she faltered, when finally she was in a condition to speak half coherently. "I—I—I am a Pre-Neuter again! The blessings of ten thousand sequons be upon you, Ruling Eminence!! The blessings of—"

"Do not bless me," the Head Neuter cut her short. "It was not done of my own desire. Bless your two friends, the Lampless Ones, who argued your case so well that I could refuse them nothing."

Zandaye turned toward us with a look of such gratitude in her flooded eyes that I felt that our sufferings on Pluto had not been in vain. Her head-lamp glowed to a lovely blue; her voice trembled as she exclaimed, "By my light! how am I ever to thank you, dear friends? You have saved my honor! You have saved my life! Now that the road to Neuterhood is open once more—"

"Come, come," broke in the Head Neuter, impatiently. "You can discuss all that after business hours! We must now get down to work again!"

And thereupon he informed Zandaye that she was to be our guide for the next seven days, and was to take us wherever we wished to go.

"Here," he concluded, reaching for a pencil and scribbling a few lines upon a small red card, "this will serve as a passport for the three of you in any gallery or Traveling Platform you may care to use. It will also entitle you to food and shelter at any of the Neuter Hotels. But your rights will expire in seven days. After that time, I will expect you all back here again. And, by the power of my lamp! I will have you brought back forcibly if you do not come of your own will! Also, I will expect to find that this dread disease, which you call the Bloated Neck, is receding everywhere in the world."

"Yes, Your Ruling Eminence," promised Stark, "that is what you will surely find!"

"If not—by my fourteen fingers, remember!—Fiery Annihilation, or worse!" threatened the Head Neuter, in a voice of thunder.

"We have no fear, Your Ruling Eminence," Stark declared.

"Then you had better make the best of your time now! Now be gone!"

We thanked His Ruling Eminence; and after raising our left hands once more in token of respect, Stark and I hastily left in the company of Zandaye and an attendant.

Our last glimpse of the Head Neuter, as we glided from the room, showed him tenderly feeling his swollen neck. "Well, colleagues," he groaned, as he awakened a member of the Governing Council by prodding him with one foot, "suppose we say we've worked enough for today. By my lamp! I'm not feeling any too well, and I think I'll be going home for some rest..."

CHAPTER XXVII

The End Of It All

AS soon as Stark and I were alone with Zandaye, we began to explain our plans. Without unfolding our purpose fully, we asked to be escorted to the long ice-coated stairway by which we had descended into the planet. At first Zandaye did not know which stairway we meant, for she said that there were many narrow, deserted tunnels which led up from the Upper or Frigid Corridors; but none of them were used nowadays or had been used for ages because of the unbearable cold. It was only after we had explained that the stairs led into a triangular gallery near a hexagonal court, that Zandaye recognized the place; there was only one such gallery in the world, she said, and that was a very, very ancient one, of a style of construction long outmoded.

As it was only a few hours' journey away, we set out together at once, using a "Traveling Platform," while both Stark and I exulted to think that escape was so near. There was only one thing to trouble us—what were we to do with Zandaye? Could we not take her with us to earth? To think what a sensation she would make!

Besides, was there not still a chance that she would link her life to mine? So accustomed had I now become to the peculiarities of Plutonian anatomy that it did not even occur to me that it would seem grotesque to have a wife with a head-lamp and fourteen fingers. Consequently, I looked for the first chance of speaking with her alone.

The opportunity came when at last we had paused to eat at one of the "Neuter Hotels" and Stark had strolled off by himself to observe a peculiar crystalline gallery.

Her head-lamp showed an orange of surprise when I hastily put the question. "Why, dear friend of mine," she exclaimed, giving me the same answer as once before, "you know that is impossible. I—I am to become a Neuter."

"But, Zandaye, if you leave this world with me it will not matter whether you are to become a Neuter or not. Think, will it not be wonderful to go far away—"

"No, no, it is impossible!" she cut me short, a wistful light in her glistening blue eyes. "Quite impossible! I am to become a Neuter; I cannot forsake my duties. Oh, my friend, if you wanted me to go with you, why did you have me restored to Pre-Neuterhood?"

"Why? Because you were so unhappy, Zandaye!" And then, as a sudden light burst upon me, "Tell me—if your rank had not been restored—would you—would you then, maybe—"

She hung her head, and her lamp showed a deep blue radiance. "Then—well then," she murmured, "I would not have had a consecrated mission."

And, as realization came to me, I groaned to think that in my very zeal to win her I had lost her forever.

Even so, I might still have pleaded—had it not been for the sudden return of Stark. In his company, we resumed our journey; yet it was only a few minutes before he had found a pretext to go roaming away with her down a side-corridor while I remained waiting alone. What transpired during the interval I do not know, but they were both gone for many minutes, and when they returned Stark looked exceedingly solemn, while Zandaye's eyes were tearful and red. . .

Only an hour later, we arrived at the triangular gallery that had been the scene of some of our first adventures on the planet. All was as on our previous visit: the long empty spaces, the branching side-corridors, and the all-suffusing radiance proceeding from no visible source in the granite walls. To find the point of our original descent was less easy, and several hours were occupied in the task, while we ranged back and forth for miles . . . until at last we found the hexagonal court, and, a few minutes later, made out a remembered circular opening in the roof.

Now it was that we laid our plans completely before Zandaye; for, until this moment, she had not known that we were to escape at this particular point. And how her face was distorted with horror, how her head-lamp glared and flickered with yellow flashes when we adjusted our fur coats and told her that we expected to climb into the stairway above the triangular gallery!

"By my father's lamp! you can't—you can't do that!" she gasped, in a voice of terror. "You can't! It's forbidden! And what of me, left here alone—"

"What of you?" I echoed, with a sudden sickening sensation. "Yes, what of you, Zandaye? How can we go, after all?"

FOR all at once it had come to me that our escape was not practicable. Were we to get away, would Zandaye not have to bear the brunt? Would the Head Neuter not vent his wrath on her? No! We must remain, though it were to face Fiery Annihilation!

The same thought must have come simultaneously to Stark. "Yes, it is as you say, Zandaye!" he criend. "We can't go! We can't leave you here alone! You must not suffer the consequences—"

Her head-lamp flamed to a momentary orange. "Suffer the consequences?" she repeated. "By the faith of a Neuter! it is not I that would suffer! It is not myself I was thinking of! I was thinking of you. For I would only have to say you had entered the Desolate Tunnels, and who would there be to blame me? But you—you would pay the penalty!"

"And you, Zandaye, would not suffer at all?" I demanded.

"Only what I must feel at losing two good friends! Only what I must feel at knowing they would perish! For the Desolate Tunnels are forbidden. They are forbidden because he who goes there can never return. They are cold—oh, so cold that a man will freeze to ice! You will not go there, my friend! Say you will not!"

Even as she spoke, her face was flooded with sudden tears; and her head-lamp glowed to a tender blue; and she reached out her arms to us imploringly.

But at that instant, from far down the gallery,

(*Continued on Page* 415)

The Empire of Glass

By **Frank Miloche**

(*Illustrated by Marchioni*)

Zigzagging with incredible speed, the fly bounded forward to renew the attack. Up came the little man's weapon.

GEORGE PRESTON stood stock still, as though suddenly petrified through some mysterious agency, one foot well forward, in the act of taking a step. A look of incredulous surprise, mingled with perplexity, showed upon his sun-tanned face.

Only a moment before he had been idly strolling through the wooded hills of Northern New Jersey, breathing deeply into grateful lungs the perfume of the fragrant spring air.

The May night was beautiful and cloudless, and lacelike patterns of black and silver, traced by the full moon, were shining through the tender new leaves of maples upon a carpet of last fall's leaves. This plus the whisperings of a timid breeze, through nodding treetops, had cast their spell upon him, until he was happily unconscious of the world of bustle and strife he had so recently left behind.

It was a sneeze, an unmistakable human sneeze, which had at first brought him out of his revery; a sound, though not startling in itself, was one that warranted investigation in this unfrequented spot so close to midnight.

Preston looked about him in surprise. There, in a small clearing, not fifty feet from him, was that which had caused his sudden halt. The appearance of any human there, at such a time, would have seemed strange enough to him, but the sight which met his astonished gaze was beyond belief.

It was the figure of a man, yet so strange a man. He was small, hardly larger than the tiniest of midgets; head, feet, and hands much too large for so small a body. He was covered from head to foot, all but his face, which was bland and expressionless, by a single tightfitting garment of spun gold, which reflected the moon's rays in tiny sparkling spears of golden light, and seemed to aid, rather than hinder his quick and agile movements.

He seemed to be unaware of Preston's spellbound presence. In one hand he held a dark cylindrical object, about eight inches in length, and three in diameter, from which emanated a greenish ray, lighting his path brilliantly with an intense light. He was pacing back and forth silently, his ridiculously tiny frame bent well forward, his eyes glued to the spot of light on the ground before him, systematically searching, as though for something he had lost.

Suddenly, as by some sixth sense, he became aware that he was observed. He turned and hurried off into the woods to his left, extinguishing the light, and was soon lost to Preston's sight.

Curiosity, overcoming Preston's surprise, spurred him to action.

"Hey," he shouted, running in the direction the strange dwarf had taken, "Stop a moment."

At the sound of Preston's voice the little man hesitated in indecision, cast a hurried glance over his shoulder, then continued on his way, faster, if anything, than before.

Increasing his pace, Preston shouted again, now fully determined to solve the mysterious actions of this still more mysterious person. The little man, now hurriedly weaving in and out among the trees, was rapidly drawing away.

"I've got to move quickly," thought Preston, "if I hope to reach him at all." And sprinting, as he used to, in his college days not so long past, he found himself rapidly gaining.

They had reached a larger clearing by the time he came within reach of his quarry. His arms were outstretched, about to grasp the tiny shoulders, a cry of victory on his lips, when his foot struck a protruding root. With a cry of pain and surprise he fell headlong. A sharp pain in his ankle told him plainly that the chase was now over. From now on he could only be a spectator, and not for very long at that, he thought, shaking his head in disgust.

When Preston looked up, expecting to see the little fellow disappear among the trees, the latter had reached the farther end of the clearing. Standing beside him, on a hillock near the fringe

FRANK MILOCHE

CONCEPTIONS of what the future of our race will be are almost as numerous as there are writers about it.

Most writers assume that our future will be the result of a logical extension of conditions of the present, thereby simplifying their task of prognostication. But what these writers overlook is chance and accident, as vital factors in the lives of our descendants.

For example some man at some future date may invent a device that will gradually become more and more important until it may finally upset the entire world of his contemporaries. The invention of such a device and its importance at some future date naturally cannot be anticipated at this time by even the shrewdest of prophets.

Our author introduces himself by an excellent tale of our descendants with their struggles for existence against a deadly menace.

of trees on the border of the open space, clearly outlined in the light of the moon, was a huge mechanical contrivance. It was as strange and outlandish a thing as Preston had ever seen.

An odd vehicle it was, resembling, he thought, nothing so much as the figure of an immense ostrich with its head buried in the ground in fright.

GLEAMING coppery metal strips, or ribs, some three inches wide, and as far apart, joined at the top and bottom, formed the body of the thing. Through these was visible a vast space, the forward part of which contained cogged wheels, levers, and weird machinery of many sorts.

Most of the remainder of the space was taken up with row upon row of little stool-like seats, empty, behind which was a single seat, placed so that the occupant thereof would be within easy reach of the controls which projected from a panel before it. This entire assembly rested on three tripod-like legs of the same metal as the rest of the machine, which held it about four feet above the ground.

The dwarf climbed easily into the seat, despite its height, deposited the flash lamp somewhere out of sight, and, with a cheerful grin across the clearing at the reclining figure of Preston, leaned forward and pulled a lever.

A low hum was the immediate result. For a fraction of a second nothing else happened. Then, as the little man fumbled with the controls, the noise increased in volume. It reached a high-pitched screech. A change was taking place. Gradually, the outlines of the machine were growing indistinct, and as the screech became almost unbearable, were becoming more vague.

Preston rubbed his eyes in disbelief. As he stared machine and man vanished! Evaporated into thin air!

Bewildered, Preston arose, his paining ankle bearing testimony that he was not asleep and dreaming, and limped to the spot where the machine had been. There, plainly visible in the soft ground, were the deep imprints of the three legs of the machine, and, leading to them, the footprints made by the strange creature.

The fading light of the waning moon brought Preston back to the commonplace. The lateness of the hour, his physical exertions, and the unusual experience he had undergone were making themselves felt. A great fatigue came over him. Looking forward now only to a good night's sleep in the woodland cabin he called his retreat, he turned wearily. Limping painfully, he retraced his former steps, and came presently upon the spot where he had first encountered the little man. He really should inspect the ground most carefully, he thought, but tomorrow would do, he was so awfully tired now.

A queerly shaped object upon the ground caught his eye. Hardly realizing he did so, so great had his fatigue grown, he stooped and picked it up, and, after a long weary half mile, finally reached the single room of his lonely shack. His cot beckoned invitingly.

The sun was high in the heavens when he awoke, refreshed. His mind flew instantly back to the startling events of the night before. Had they been nightmares of a troubled sleep?

As though to prove the reality of his strange adventure, a ray of the sun, streaming through a window, fell full upon an object lying on a chair beside his bed. What was this thing? He was sure it had not been there yesterday.

He remembered now. It was the object he had found last night in the small clearing, and in all probability that for which the dwarf had been so methodically searching.

Excitedly he reached for it, and examined it. It was a sort of helmet, constructed of a flexible brownish metal, made so that it could fit snugly over any head. Rather bulky it was, and not light in weight. Preston saw that it would not only cover the entire head, but the eyes and ears as well. Queer triangular knobs protruded, one high in the center of the forehead of the thing, and one on each side, just above that portion of the instrument that would cover the ears. They turned readily at Preston's touch with little clicking noises.

"I wonder what this can be," he mused, and realizing that to experiment was the only method to determine, he carefully adjusted it upon his head, and turned the dial-like knob on the forehead.

A sharp click, and instantly a blur of vari-colored light sprang before his eyes, and simultaneously, a roar, like that of nearby thunder sounded in his ears.

Nervously he turned the knob above his right ear. The blur of colors swirled, like smoke in slightly agitated air, and evolved into a lifelike scene, while the roaring sounds faded into silence.

Now intensely interested, Preston stared in amazement at the marvelous sight before him.

The sun was beating mercilessly down upon a tremendously wide highway of a smooth substance which looked like glass of a milky hue. As far as the eye could see it stretched out before him in an unbroken line, disappearing in the distance. On either side rising directly from the roadway, were towering buildings of strange design, reaching it seemed to the very skies. Some, in fact, penetrated occasional clouds of fleecy white, their pinnacles quite invisible, and to judge their incredible heights was an impossibility.

A Life and Death Struggle

WINDOWS there were none in the smooth, tinted glass walls, which reflected the light, throwing beams of various colors in all directions. The first impression that all was immaculate, and well kept, was destroyed, for as he looked down he saw that scars and cracks in the roadway and cracked walls of the buildings testified to the ravages of time that could not be stemmed. The cold shimmer of the scene, coupled with the absence of life of any kind gave Preston an uncanny impression of death and desolation.

This feeling grew, until Preston became decidedly uneasy. He was about to turn the other knob, to see what further adventures were in store for him, when a lone figure emerged from the arched doorway of the building nearest him.

He was the counterpart of the dwarf of the night before, but with one exception. He wore a broad leather belt, strapped closely to his body, on the back of which hung a dark boxlike object. A flexible metal tube curved from its side to the right hand of the little man, which held its nozzle, thumb on a small round button.

It was obviously a weapon, for, as he hurried along the broad highway, he fingered it nervously, casting uneasy glances skyward, as though fearing an attack from that direction.

A hundred yards he walked, and, a startled look of fear suddenly clouding his features, he whirled swiftly into the shallow doorway of the building nearest him. He tried the door hurriedly. It would not open. His movements became frantic. He wheeled, the muzzle of the weapon flashing in his hand.

The cause for his alarm now only became apparent to Preston.

With a roar as that of a dozen airplanes, a huge, dark body was hurtling through the air. Down the canyon of skyscrapers it came, making straight for the trembling little figure, down, down until it was but a few feet from him.

What was this monstrous flying thing, darting so swiftly through the air?

Although surprises were becoming more or less common to Preston by this time, recognition of this gigantic creature attacking the little man caused his heart to leap wildly, his breath to stick in his throat.

It was a gigantic species of fly, red of head, its manifold eyes gleaming wickedly as it watched intently every move of its prey. An ugly, hairy, black body was borne swiftly as lightning on transparent wings, made almost invisible by their rapid vibrations. Its six spidery legs, sharp claws at their extremities, hideously outstretched in anticipation of the pictured feast to come. Its enormous size held Preston transfixed. Fully seven feet in length it was, its fat puffy body nauseating in effect.

The dwarf threw himself to the ground and rolled rapidly away from the beast, into a niche made by the doorway, narrowly escaping the first vicious lunge, and drew himself into as small a space as possible. One hand he held outthrust in protection against the onslaughts of the ponderous insect, the other was kept busily engaged with the weapon which he kept pointed always toward his foe.

Zigzagging with incredible speed, the fly bounded forward to renew its attack. Up came the little man's hand. He pressed the button of his weapon. Instantly a flashing beam of scintillating blue stabbed the air. The fly had apparently felt the effects of the ray before, for it dodged at the last possible moment, allowing the ray to pass harmlessly by. It retreated several hundred feet, beyond the range of the weapon, only to resume the attack immediately.

This time its tremendous velocity carried it to the dwarf. An outthrust claw caught for an instant in the leather girdle, but only for an instant, then slithered off.

At this close range, the ray, expertly manipulated by the tiny figure, got in its work. It touched the ugly body. There was a searing flash of flame, and a puff of black smoke.

Wings beating the pavement noisily, the fly fell to the ground and rolled over and over. It seemed for an instant that the battle was over, but the insect recovered quickly, and rose with an effort high into the air.

It circled slowly, rising higher and higher, its movements impaired somewhat due to its injury, reached a dizzy height directly above the prone figure of the dwarf, and dropped like a plummet.

The little man now changed his tactics. Bounding to his feet with a yell, he raced to the center of the street where, dodging here and there, weaving from side to side, never still for a moment, he awaited what he knew would be the final onslaught of his terrible adversary.

DOWN, down it came, its wings folded, dropping like a screeching projectile. It seemed as though it must crash to its death on the hard glass pavement. With scarcely a foot to spare it spread its wings, and zoomed horizontally, literally throwing itself upon the dwarf. He jumped aside to avoid its furious clutch, but too late.

As though he were but a babe, in an eagle's claws, the horrible creature caught him with its hairy loathsome legs and hugged him closely to its body, soaring skyward. With an agonizing cry, the dwarf became limp in its clutches.

Suddenly his senses returned, and realizing his precarious position, he sprang into action. Wrenching one arm free he caught up the muzzle of his weapon, and at point blank range squeezed the trigger. Again and again the destructive rays of blue penetrated the hairy body, and at each burning flash, a large patch of flesh was destroyed.

Weaker and weaker became the fly, its clutch loosening, until the little man was forced to cling desperately to a sticky leg to avoid a fatal fall. Wobbling now, the insect was fast losing altitude, and in its weakened state, and encumbered by its burden, it was not long before it neared the ground. When still fifteen feet above the pavement, the dwarf released his hold, landed with a thud in the center of the street, and lay still.

Badly crippled, but still able to fly, the wounded monster, relieved of its burden, careened crazily from side to side, wobbled off, and presently became lost to view in the distance.

For some minutes the dwarf remained where he had fallen, then rose shakily to his feet, and resumed his walking in silence. Soon he reached a building considerably smaller than the rest, and entered in evident relief.

Preston found that by turning the knob on the left hand side of the helmet a hair's breadth he could follow the movements of the dwarf handily, and keep him in sight wherever he went.

The room the little man entered was small and bright. The walls, although strangely opaque, permitted the sunlight of the outdoors to enter. They were smooth and bare, except for the one opposite the door, which was covered with electrical equipment of strange and varied sorts.

Near the door, and directly in front of it, barely permitting one to enter, stood a desk of shining glass, the top of which held nothing on its polish-

ed surface but a row of buttons on each side, each marked with a strange character, which Preston could not recognize.

At the desk sat a man of the same race as those of which Preston had already seen two, older of face, and wrinkled, but otherwise identical. As the other entered, he looked up in expectancy and spoke.

Preston was not through with surprises which were flocking upon him almost too fast for him to comprehend.

The man was speaking English!

"Ah, Nebo, greetings," he said with a look of hope lighting his otherwise sad face. "Your presence here, at such a time, can mean only one thing. Tell me quickly, to relieve an old man's anxiety, is it really so? Has Hebor then really been successful?"

"Yes, Palo, he has returned," was the joyous reply. "Last night very late he arrived with the happy news we have been awaiting so long. Have you everything in readiness for me as I have requested?"

Palo frowned reproachfully. "For a long time, aye, too long a time have I tended this, one of the last two remaining transportation system stations, and as long as it has been idle, never for a moment have I not kept it in readiness for instant use."

"Good," smiled Nebo. "Then, at once, put me through to our few remaining friends in the further end of Nork, our once great city, that I may inform them of their great good fortune. Even a moment's delay, as you well know, may be fatal to one or more of them, and now, that deliverance is assured, it would be an ironical fate to lose even one more precious life."

As he spoke he entered a small inclosed booth standing against the wall opposite the entrance. Palo followed and assisted him in fastening a metal band firmly about his neck. Two other metal strips were fastened on Nebo's wrists. Insulated wires ran from all these bands to a panel mounted on the wall beside the booth. A complicated arrangement of coils, wire wound, and condensers, as well as indicators were upon this panel. Two wires of a much greater thickness stretched downward and disappeared through a hole in the floor—to a power plant in the basement, Preston concluded.

The floor of the booth was a network of bare copper wires arranged like a spider's web, upon which Nebo stood. Two metal handles projected from the rear wall of the enclosure, which he grasped firmly, one in each hand.

"Ready?" asked Palo.

"Ready! Five minutes will suffice as my stay. Be in readiness to direct my return then."

"Hold tight," was Palo's final admonition. He adjusted the instruments on the panel, turned, and walked to his desk, and sat down. His hand went out. A finger touched the second button from him on his left. There was a loud click.

Preston was again to see one of the strange people disappear before his eyes. As he afterward expressed it, he was becoming accustomed to the procedure.

The result was instantaneous. Where Nebo had stood a moment before there was now nothing but empty space.

Hope of Deliverance?

PALO sat quietly at his desk, intently watching a vibrating needle on the panel which he could plainly see from where he sat. An age it seemed to Preston's befuddled brain, but in reality it was but a few minutes before the needle trembled more violently, and rose an inch with a jerk. Palo again reached forward, and pressed the corresponding button on the right. Before his finger lifted, there, in the booth again, with the bands fastened to him as before, stood Nebo.

Palo released him, and he stepped nimbly from the enclosure.

"The word has been passed," Nebo said, smiling in satisfaction. "Palo, our brethren are, of course, overjoyed at the prospect of their deliverance, and already are hastening to the large meeting hall for the great adventure. And you, Palo, have in all probability operated the Radiomatic Transportation System for the last time, in this age, at least."

"Yes, and I am glad, and yet, necessary as it may be, it is not without a feeling of regret with which I will leave all this behind," Palo said, waving his hand to include all of his beloved and familiar machinery. "It is harder than you, a younger man, can perhaps realize."

With a "Cheer up, we leave all hardships behind," Nebo caught Palo's arm in the crook of his own, and together they walked toward the exit.

Opening the door, they peered cautiously out into the open, weapons in hand. It was well for them they did so. The sun was obscured as though by heavy clouds. An enormous horde of the gigantic insects covered the entire sky. Off to the horizon they stretched, thousands upon thousands of them. Several of them were crawling on the thoroughfare, poking their hungry jowls as far as they possibly could into the locked doorways of the buildings, seeking human food and finding none. Creeping on to repeat the action at each nook and cranny, they advanced, and rapidly neared the two dwarfs.

With glistening eyes, one of the monsters espied them, and with a rush was upon them. Just in time Nebo swung the door shut with a bang, safely putting it between them and the clawing creatures outside.

For half an hour they waited in silence, then ventured forth again. The sky was clear, the insects gone. They walked swiftly back in the direction from which Nebo had come.

Without further mishap, they reached the building from which Preston had first seen Nebo emerge, and entered.

Within was a room of vast dimensions. The glass walls of a delicate rosy hue were divided into panels by immense pillars of snow-white marble, equally spaced, and about twenty feet apart. They supported an arched ceiling fifty feet above a smooth, highly polished glass floor. Palo and Nebo took their places among some hundred and fifty of their fellow men and wo-

men, who were reclining upon soft mats of a light grey material in various positions of ease and comfort.

The women were clad like the men, except that their garments, instead of having a golden color, were of silver. They were smaller in stature than the men, with limbs and heads more perfectly proportioned to their tiny supple bodies. Preston could not but marvel at their profound beauty.

A low babble of voices filled the room. All were discussing the probable nature of the revelations to come.

As time went on, others entered, joining those on the floor, some in groups of threes and fours, while others drifted in singly. At last a group of sixty entered together. One of the dwarfs, who had been enumerating the arrivals, closed the door and locked it, announcing that all were now present. He touched a push button beside the door. A musical note sounded clearly throughout the hall. At once a complete silence fell over the assemblage, their attention becoming centered on a raised dais at one end of the room.

Two figures, one of which Preston recognized as the dwarf of his recent adventure, stepped out upon the platform, entering through a narrow door at its rear. The other advanced and addressed his fellow men. Loudly and clearly he began.

"We who are assembled here are, as you all know, the only survivors of the once proud rulers of the earth, man. Mankind's struggle against the insect pest, dating from his first days on the earth, have finally reached the stage where he must admit defeat.

"How the insects grew, first in uncountable numbers, and then, gradually in size, destroying our crops faster than they could be planted, is certainly no news to you. Then went our domestic animals, as food for the always ravenous horde, and finally, when they had destroyed everything else, and they had reached their present gigantic proportions, they preyed upon us like cats on mice.

"ALL too fresh in your memories are the awful horrors of the starvation and plagues that followed, until the few of us who now remain grovel in our buildings too fearful of our lives to venture forth. We subsist on our little remaining tinned and preserved food, resigned to a horrible untimely death in one form or another.

"Our doom was written, our fate sealed. Until yesterday there was nothing to look forward to but death, and the end of humanity on earth. Deliverance has come! Words are not adequate to express the thanks we owe to the greatest of all saviors, Hebor. You see him before you now. Let him tell you himself of his experiments and experiences. Here he is!"

A tremendous ovation greeted Hebor. More like a child who has committed some trivial wrong and was about to be reprimanded, than the idol of the last of mankind, he stepped forward. With a meek little high-pitched voice that grew stronger and bolder as he progressed, he spoke.

"In fear of creating false hopes in your hearts, because of possible failure, I have kept the exact nature of my experiments from most of you.

"When I was still young, when scientists were still centering all their endeavors on the systematic extermination of the fast overpowering insect pests, their lack of successful results created within me the conviction that the only hope of the continued existence of the human race lay in flight.

"In my first wild dreams I considered the migration of our entire remaining population, which was great then, to another planet. Therefore I isolated myself in the great, almost forgotten record halls, and delved deeply into the recorded theories and experiments of long dead scientists. All research along these lines I eagerly perused, only to find that, according to the great men of the past, although it had been possible to reach far out into space, not one of the planets or other nearby heavenly bodies is capable of sustaining life such as ours.

"My disappointment was acute, my dream shattered. Yet I read on, in what I then thought was a useless endeavor to find some way out of our difficulty. Quite by chance I came one day upon the experiments of one Herman Dryfuss in the year 2416. That was shortly before Germany, the country which he claimed as his fatherland, and all the other nations of the earth banded together in one great democracy for mutual protection and the advancement of humanity.

"Dryfuss was the first to *prove* the old theory that time is a dimension as is length, breadth, and height, by making a machine whereby one could see into past or future, as one wished. At the time, it created a tremendous sensation, although it was crude and could not function beyond a year or two in either direction. An ingenious plaything it was, not much more.

"But then came the invention of the Radiomatic Transportation System, which we use today, to be transferred from one place to another by means of beam radio transmission (although now most of our great depots are in a state of disrepair and useless). With the advent of this machine the time-gazing instrument was forgotten, and never further developed.

"In the time-gazing device, however, I saw, vaguely at first, the means of a possible salvation. Following plans which were presented in the volumes I studied, I went immediately to work, and soon had constructed a working model. It did all that it was supposed to, but I was not satisfied.

"Improving the instrument was a difficult task, but a year later I had before me a time-gazing device that was as perfect as it was wonderful. Not only could I see, but hear as well, into past or future as far as I willed.

"With its use came the flashing realization that if it were possible to do this, surely it would be just as possible to build a machine that would actually transport one in time.

"For all these years I have been working on that. I will not bore you with the obstacles I

met and overcame. Suffice to say that finally, only a few days ago, I had completed just such an instrument.

The Past or the Future?

"NOW it became necessary to determine which way, and how far to go. Rather than risk actual trips in time to reconnoiter, I decided to use my time-gazing device. I placed the helmet over my head, and set the dials for a period of time one hundred years in the future.

"A terrible scene of destruction lay before me. Our once great city was nothing more than a mass of ruins. Buildings had toppled, and where they had stood lay piles of crumbled glass and twisted steel. The flies were everywhere. With no other food to be had, they were viciously battling amongst themselves, and, as the vanquished fell, the victorious fell upon them, devouring them greedily.

"It was horrible, revolting, disgusting, yet not without its ray of hope. Surely it meant the ultimate destruction of our enemies.

"Slowly I extended the range of the helmet. I was right. As the years rolled on before me, the ponderous insects were becoming fewer and fewer, succumbing to their own hunger and greed, until finally, almost a thousand years hence, none remained.

"Having determined the nature of the future, I now reversed the action of the time gazer, and began to scan the past.

"Many varied scenes moved before me as I slowly visited optically civilizations of bygone days. Scenes of wars and horrors, perils and strife, inventions and discoveries, misery and despair, peace and contentment, all rolled on before me in review.

"Finally I found what I was seeking. Almost a thousand years in the past I came upon a peaceful wood, free of inhabitants and buildings, although not far distant from a large city. Here, possibly was the place for us to live the remainder of our lives in peace and quiet.

"Before daring to determine a definite course of action, I felt compelled to investigate thoroughly the character and habits of the people of this period. This I accomplished by again visiting the halls of record. I also wished to give the time traveler a severe and rigid test. Last night, therefore, I stepped into it.

"I set the controlling instruments carefully for the required distance, reached out, and pulled the starting lever. There was an ear-splitting roar. The room faded into nothingness before me. I grew faint, and lost consciousness altogether.

"When I came to, the machine was resting in a quiet forest. I looked about. It was the same spot I had seen through the gazer.

"Taking my helmet with me, I stepped to the ground and strolled off into the restful forest, glorying in a peace and quiet such as I had never before experienced. It seemed like paradise to my worn and ragged nerves. Soothed by the hitherto unknown quietude, I sat down under a spreading tree to rest for a moment, and it was not long before I had fallen fast asleep.

"I awoke with a start, as one will in a strange place. My time helmet was missing. I must have dropped it, unnoticed, while walking. I hurriedly returned to the time traveler, and procured my flash lamp, and soon was busily seeking the helmet.

"The sound of a step nearby interrupted me. Someone was approaching. To be questioned at this time, I considered an unnecessary risk, and therefore left the helmet lying wherever it may have fallen. I could retrieve it later with ease. I ran quickly to the traveler and returned, at once, to you, to spread the news. It was too late at night then, so here I am.

"There are now two possibilities. Shall we go backward in time to the year 1930, or forward into 4930? My friends, it is up to you. I dare not take the responsibility upon myself. But before you decide, allow me to outline to you the merits and difficulties of both.

"Should we decide on the former, we would enter a strange civilization, one that is so different from ours that it would take us years to become accustomed to it, if we ever did. We would surely be looked upon as curiosities, for we could not hope to remain there for any length of time without being discovered. As freaks, perhaps to be exploited.

"And should we finally be recognized for what we are, and given a place in that world of the past, in that huge sea of humanity, though we could surely help them scientifically, and mechanically, we would lose our personality, and eventually mingle, probably to intermarry with them. It means certain life, and perhaps a happy one should we reach there, which I am certain we could do.

"If, on the other hand, you decide on the latter course, it means entering a perfect wilderness. Even the crumbled ruins of these noble buildings of ours will be less than useless as shelter, if we find any traces of them at all. It will be heartbreaking work to even attempt to survive, yet, with perseverence and diligent toil, we have a chance, a bare chance to lay the foundation of a greater, a better civilization than has ever been dreamt of before.

"Either course is fraught with peril. Which, my dear friends, shall it be?"

THERE was a low murmur from the assembled multitude, but only for a moment. Then one of the dwarfs on the floor arose. It was Palo.

"Hebor," he said in a very quiet voice, "our people are weary, tired of the eternal battle against odds too great to conquer. yet I believe I am voicing the opinion of all when I say—let us go onward, out into the future! I, for one, would rather perish fighting for a place under the sun, than live in comparative peace and contentment, after having begged for it from an alien people."

A roar of approval issued from every throat. "Onward, forward!" was heard from all sides.

Hebor raised his hand in a gesture calling for silence.

"You have decided," he said. "Let me congratulate you on your courageous and noble decision. Come, then, there is no time like the

present. If you will follow into the next room, and take the places assigned to you in the craft, we will be off."

With an assenting shout the assembled men and women rose and followed their two leaders through a large door into an adjourning room.

This was by far the largest which Preston had yet seen. It was empty except for the large machine, the same one he had first observed in the forest.

The people of Nork, the last remaining city of the world, climbed in an orderly fashion into the cab of the enormous time traveler, and took places assigned to them by Hebor. A few remained to load crates, bales and boxes into another portion of the craft, which they brought from out another room. At length they had finished, and joined the others, and all quietly awaited the great moment of departure.

Hebor took his seat at the controls. He turned to face the others in their rather cramped quarters, and said, "The journey we are about to take is not without its perils. Our craft is as staunch and dependable as my few assistants and I could make it. It has passed to my satisfaction the most severe tests to which I could submit it. It should, aye, it must take us to our destination.

"Yet nothing mechanical is ever perfection. There is always the one chance in a thousand that something may go wrong. And when we do reach our destination there will be all sorts of tremendous difficulties to overcome. Should any of you feel that you prefer to remain, to take your chances with the conditions here, now, if ever, is the time to speak."

There was an unanimous chorus of "No! We will go with you."

"Good people," Hebor said solemnly, his voice shaking with emotion. "I pray your confidence has not been wrongly placed."

In a dead silence now, he carefully made the necessary adjustments on the panel before him. With a final glance at the room which was never to be looked upon again by mortal eyes, he jerked the starting lever.

With the now familiar sounds the time traveler, with all its occupants, began fading from Preston's view.

It was growing vague, the sounds fading rapidly.

Preston reached to turn the knob which would enable him to keep the flight of the craft in view. An excited, last audible voice came to his ears. It was Hebor's.

"Quick, Nebo, the helmet! We will need it. Press that button beside you! Hurry!"

Preston's head bobbed forward. Some strange force seemed to be pulling at the helmet. There was a last terrific jerk, and the force subsided.

Partially dazed his hands went to his head. The helmet was gone. Gone with the tiny people of the future on their perilous journey into the unknown.

THE END

FOR THE MAY ISSUE OF WONDER STORIES

"Utopia Island"

We are more than pleased to present to our readers beginning with the May issue the complete novel "Utopia Island" by Otto von Hanstein. Our readers who have read the QUARTERLY will no doubt remember his two other masterpieces—"Between Earth and Moon," and "Electropolis"—which caused a tremendous stir not only in Europe, where the stories were published first, but in the United States as well, when the stories appeared in the QUARTERLY.

This new story by Otto von Hanstein is as daring as his others, and in many respects, far surpasses them.

The story contains literally dozens of new scientific prophecies which we have never seen in print before and which are sure to be realized in the future. Von Hanstein has even gone into the field of sports and has evolved a number of sports unknown at the present time, all based upon new scientific discoveries.

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adds to his successes by this new interplanetary tale

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in which the life forms on a strange world are vividly portrayed in a story filled with action and terrifying suspense. We cannot expect human beings on Venus or Mars. But we can expect life, and intelligent life. What will it be like, and how will it react to we human beings? Mr. Repp tells us.

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a tremendous story of an ultimatum. "Get out of your world within 48 hours came the word . . . Or else . . . destruction . . ." But they fought back . . . futilely . . . energetically . . . stupidly . . . in this masterly written story by

John B. Harris

of Bonnie Old England.

Morrison F. Colladay

offers another of his intensely realistic stories

"The Cosmic Gun"

a mystery story in which the fates of nations hang in the balance, while unknown men labor for justice against terrific odds.

AND OTHERS

IN THE MAY 1931 WONDER STORIES ON ALL NEWSSTANDS APRIL 1

The Avenging Ray

By **A. Rowley Hilliard**

(*Illustrated by Marchioni*)

PATROLMAN Pat Connolly, piloting his light car across the marshes beyond Bayside, Long Island, on his way to relieve the man in the sentry-box at the top of the hill in Douglaston, slowed suddenly; and peered ahead, slightly surprised.

At four in the morning it was not usual to see a car parked in a place like this. His surprise gave way to alarm as, coming nearer, he saw the legs. The car was drawn over to the side of the road, and out beyond the left front wheel stretched a pair of legs—motionless on the ground.

Connolly, with a final pressure on the brake pedal, came to a stop just behind the mysterious car. A "ride"—another gangster getting "his"; Connolly quickly concluded. This was a regular old place for it; not a hundred yards from the spot, "Tip" Morelli had checked in a couple of weeks ago. . . .

"A little break for Pat!" he chuckled as he climbed from his seat. "I ain't found a dead gangster for over a year!" Swinging his night-stick he approached the legs; but as he rounded the front of the car he halted, shocked. The body lay in the bright light of the headlamps—face up, and that face was distorted in a horrible expression of disgust; but it was the throat at which Connolly gazed wide-eyed. "Guy sure

As the reflector swung around there ran across the field, a wave of leaping animals, leaving behind it charred lifeless bodies.

got it in the neck!" he muttered. Slowly he approached, and knelt down beside the sprawled figure. "Good God!" he breathed, for the man's throat was rent and torn in a way that no bullets had ever done. Blood covered his neck, and stained the ground beneath. Suddenly Connolly bent down intently, catching his breath. From the torn throat the blood was pulsing. The man still lived! The officer recognized the need for immediate action; this man must be got to a doctor. Running back to his car whose engine was still turning, he drove it up as near the body as possible.

He had just alighted, preparatory to lifting the silent figure, when suddenly, he was hit viciously by something heavy and hot and furry. The impact of the blow threw him backwards against the hood of his car.

Indignantly, Officer Connolly raised his arms to throw off the thing which was clinging to his shoulders; but, although he was a very powerful man, his efforts were futile. With sudden horror he felt a ripping of the high collar of his uniform; and he yelled, and beat the thing with his fists. A sharp pain at his throat. . . .

With the realization that he was fighting for his life his wits returned. His right hand darted to the holster at his side; and putting the revolver against the long, heavy body of his assailant he fired three times.

In a flash the thing had gone. Dazed and shaking, Connolly raised his left hand to this throat; and took it away red and wet.

"Damn it!" he said; and then, raising his eyes, he let out another yell. The man on the ground was almost completely covered by a long, dark form! Not daring to shoot, Connolly rushed forward, and kicked at the thing with all his strength. So quickly that his eye could not follow its motions, the thing was upon him, and he was borne to the ground. Lying flat upon his

back, he fired twice; and was free. Now he wasted no time.

Grasping the limp figure, he heaved it into the car; and leaped into the driver's seat. But he was not yet free. Hurtling through the open side of the car came a third assailant, and he was knocked violently over against his unconscious companion. Again the heavy weight upon him, the horrible pain in his throat. . . .

Desperately, but with infinite care, he fired his last shot. As if by magic, the creature was gone. In second gear the car roared forward—twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five miles an hour.

"Out of it!" breathed Connolly as he shifted into high; then relief gave place to wonder—"but, what the hell—?" Getting no light on this question, his thoughts quickly returned to the man by his side. A doctor!—yes, the first thing now must be a doctor. Dr. McCord!—Right across the road from the Douglaston sentry-box; he had seen the sign hundreds of times. . . .

At a steady rate of fifty miles an hour the car had now crossed the marshes, and was ascending the hill. Houses now and a traffic light. To hell with the traffic light! The car roared on two blocks, and came to a grinding stop. In five seconds Connolly was on the porch, ringing the bell and beating and kicking the door.

"Coming — coming — coming!" came the shout from inside, and in a moment the door was flung open. The doctor was attired in his trousers and slippers. "All right—what?" he questioned tersely.

"Man out here," snapped Connolly, "losing a quart of blood a minute. Help me get him!"

WITHOUT a word the doctor followed him to the car. Together they lifted the limp figure, and bore it into the house where they laid it upon a table. The face was a ghastly white.

Swiftly the doctor worked to staunch the flow of blood. "Jugular pierced," he muttered. "Looks like a bite."

"Is a bite!" agreed Connolly. For the first time he felt weak; he swayed slightly, and sank into a chair. The doctor raised his head.

"You too?" he said in astonishment.

"Me too! But tend to him. My jugular ain't pierced, I don't think. Just groggy."

The doctor, however, walked over to examine him. "No, you're not so bad," he agreed. "I'll fix you up in a minute." Returning to the table, he worked intently, muttering occasionally. "Hospital for this fellow—die before morning without a transfusion—ought to be conscious soon, though—"

As if the words had been a signal, the man's eye-lids fluttered and opened. Connolly rose, and joined the doctor at his side. His white lips moved.

"Louise?" he breathed.

A horrible suspicion came to Connolly. "Who is Louise?" he asked tensely.

The man made a visible effort. "My wife—she—"

"In the car?" Connolly barked.

"Yes!"

Headlong, the officer dashed out of the house, across the street, and flung open the door of the sentry-box.

"Moran!" he shouted.

The officer addressed got to his feet, and stretched himself. "Well, it's about time—" he started, and then caught a glimpse of the other. "What the hell—"

"Git a squad car and ambulance!" snapped Connolly.

Without a word the other scooped up a 'phone. "Squad car—number 42 box—Douglaston — snappy! Git St. James hospital — ambulance —same place!" Dropping the 'phone, he turned to Connolly. "What the hell hit you?"

"Don't know!"

"Don't know?" gasped Moran, but the other was gone. Across the street he stumbled, and into the house.

"Fix me up, Doc; an' give me a drink. I got work to do!"

The doctor set to work. "Understand, this is only temporary. That neck of yours will have

A. ROWLEY HILLIARD

ONE of the most intriguing nooks in the world of science is that presented by the electro-magnetic spectrum. Here we have a series of energy radiations that, as the wavelength changes, changes entirely its character and its effect on human life. We have the long radio waves that serve as an agent of man for wireless communication across thousands of miles; the same types of waves shortened become the instrument of keeping him warm across the vacuum of space that separates the sun from us. Make the waves still shorter and we get radiations that make for visible light. These long waves are all beneficial agents. But as the waves become shorter and shorter beyond visible light their character changes and they are not only beneficial if properly employed but terribly destructive if misused.

This gripping and intensely realistic story by the author of "The Green Torture" utilizes the above idea in a most thrilling manner.

to be rather methodically sterilized as soon as possible. Here, drink this."

Connolly drank, and felt better. "Ambulance be here any minute," he said, "for that guy. Got a hunch we won't need no ambulance where I'm goin'!"

"Just where are you going?" inquired McCord with interest.

Producing his revolver, Connolly began methodically to reload it. "Down on the marshes," he said, "to find Louise, but I guess Louise is—" Catching the doctor's eye, he stopped suddenly. The man on the table, eyes wide, was staring at the ceiling.

"—Is all right!" finished Connolly heartily. "Sure!"

"What is down on the marshes?" asked McCord intently.

Connolly scratched his head. "Well," he answered slowly, "I couldn't rightly say.—Some sort of—"

The harsh wail of a siren from the street stopped him. "Gotta go!" he muttered, and went —on the run.

"Well, Connolly?" greeted Captain Stecker interrogatively, as the other came into view.

"Down on the marshes, sir—a woman in a car—got to get her!"

The Captain placed his hands on his hips. "Since when, Connolly, do you need a squad to get a woman out of a car?" he inquired ominously.

"There's other things, sir—some sort of murderin' animals!"

"Murderin' animals?" repeated Stecker. Suddenly he sniffed. "Connolly, you been drinkin'!"

Officer Connolly's nerves were badly worn. He grunted angrily. "Sure—an' you'd be drinkin' too if you'd been where I been. There's a guy damn near dead now, an' there'll be a woman dead if we stand here jawin' all night!"

The other nodded. "Hop in, then," he snapped; and the car, gathering momentum, pounded down the hill. "Now what the hell do you mean by 'murdering animals'?"

"Somethin'," replied Connolly, shaking his head in a puzzled way, "that jumps on you and bites your neck."

The Captain snorted.

" 'Bout the size of a dog," added Connolly.

"Pekinese or Saint Bernard?" snarled Stecker.

"No, like an Airedale—only longer and slimmer."

"Hot dog, maybe!" snapped the other. The Captain was officially in bed, and that always irritated him.

"Look!" exclaimed Connolly suddenly.

The powerful searchlight had picked out the parked car on the road ahead. And all around it dark shadows darted and swirled. At the thunderous approach of the police car, however, they melted into nothingness.

The men surrounded the lonely touring car. "Somebody in the back seat," said one. "See?"

The figure of a woman was sprawled in the tonneau—just visible. Stecker mounted the running board, and leaned inside.

"Cold!" he reported tersely. "Here, you guys —get her out."

They lifted the limp figure into the light. The skin was as blankly white as a sheet of paper. The mutilated throat told the story.

"God!" cried Stecker, "There ain't a drop of blood left in her!"

CHAPTER II

The Mystery Deepens

AT six o'clock that morning the man in St. James Hospital rallied enough to make a short statement, which was, in effect, this:

He, Joseph Blaine, a resident of Little Neck, was returning late with his wife from an evening on Broadway. Just beyond Bayside a front tire had blown out. His wife, very sleepy, had curled up in the back seat; he had set about repairing the damage. A few minutes later he had heard his wife scream loudly, as if in terror. At almost the same moment he had been hit heavily, and knocked flat upon the ground. His struggles to rise had been useless, as some sort of animal was on top of him biting his throat. . . .

At this point the narrator fainted, and did not again recover consciousness. He died at a few minutes after seven before a blood transfusion could be effected.

The date was March 11.

On March 27, Frank Higgins, a real-estate dealer of Flushing, set out to play a lone round of golf on the course laid out over a section of the extensive Municipal Dumps lying between Flushing and Corona. In the early evening, he was found lying in a sand trap, bloodless, his head almost detached.

Throughout March an ever-increasing number of complaints concerning the disappearance of dogs, cats, and other domestic animals, had been registered in the outlying districts of the Borough of Queens; and it was an astonishing fact that not one of the missing animals was ever recovered. This situation aroused considerable interest and a certain amount of indignation against the apparently inactive police.

But something more than indignation was aroused in the minds of citizens who, on the morning of April 3, were startled by the following newspaper story:

THREE CHILDREN DISAPPEAR FROM BAYSIDE PARK

Suggested Connection With Mysterious Loss of Pets in Last Month

Three kiddies, all under ten, who, according to witnesses, were playing together in the Public Park on the eastern outskirts of Bayside could not be found at a late hour last night. The children, John Grayson—9, Amelia Grayson—5, and Robert Caldwell—7, had been sent to the park in the middle of the afternoon by their parents who live nearby. When, at six o'clock, they did not return, their worried parents set out after them; but no trace of them could be found. Police were notified, and, aided by alarmed neighbors who have been annoyed recently by the wholesale disappearance of their household pets, they instituted a search. At ten o'clock last night no results had been obtained.

Daniel Boles, a neighbor, states that about five in the afternoon, when on his way to the Bayside Yacht Club, he saw the children in the park, and spoke to them. They were playing with pebbles on the shore of the Bayside Inlet. They have not been since seen.

The police suggest a kidnapping, but the distracted parents and a number of nearby residents fear that the mysterious agency which has caused the disappearance of so many dogs, cats, etc., recently in the vicinity is responsible.

The bewilderment and uneasiness caused by this item was considerably increased by the news, in the evening papers, that the body of one of the children—John Grayson—had been discovered by a gang of searchers on the marshes, east of Bayside, "in a mutilated and bloodless condition".

The terrible similarity of this to the cases of Frank Higgins and Joseph and Louise Blaine was blazoned forth in banner headlines and front page editorials. The North Shore of Long Island was becoming alarmed.

THE seven members of the hastily-created commission sat in various attitudes about the huge mahogany table in one of the conference rooms of the Municipal Building in New York City. Their various physical positions were indicative of the varying mental attitudes of the commissioners towards the matter in hand.

Major Zorn of the State Militia and Enright Healy, head of the City Planning Bureau, leaned back in their chairs with far-away looks—frankly bored. As opposed to them, Dr. Lorian P. Jules, physicist and zoologist, listened with strained attention to the remarks of the Chairman. The attitudes of the remaining commissioners ranged between these two extremes; and the group, as a whole, did not appear to be capable of any very concerted action.

"To sum up, Gentlemen," said the Chairman, by way of concluding his remarks, "we have been delegated to estimate the importance of certain things and fatal events recently reported in the Borough of Queens, and to determine what action must be taken in the matter.

"If there is no objection, I suggest that we now hear from Officer Patrick Connolly of the Queens Police. He seems to be the only man who has encountered these—these things, and lived to tell the tale."

At these words Dr. Jules was seen to smile slightly—rather grimly; but he said nothing, and merely nodded with the rest of them. At a word from the Chairman, the attendant left the room, quickly returning, followed by Officer Connolly—very stiff and dignified in a new uniform.

Inspector Kelly, also of the Queensboro Police and a member of the commission, smiled up at him. "Connolly, these gentlemen would like to hear what happened to you on March 11. Stand at the foot of the table there, and tell us about it!"

Connolly made a good witness. He told his story in a straightforward and simple fashion, confining himself exclusively to the narration of facts. In less than ten minutes he had finished. Six of the men heard him calmly, and with little show of emotion; but with Dr. Jules it was different.

Every word appeared to cut him like a knife; as the story of the tragedy progressed his face became haggard and lined, and when the narrator told of finding the slain woman he buried his head in his hands.

As Connolly finished, Zorn, who had been gazing abstractedly out of the window, smiled unpleasantly. He had been drafted for this job much against his will. Several important personal projects had been rudely interrupted, and he was not feeling particularly friendly towards anybody or anything.

"It would appear strange," said he, "that the officer did not even so much as glance into the darkened car on his first visit to the spot. It is possible that the danger to his own person at the time might be slightly exaggerated."

Connolly went a dark red, but said nothing. Inspector Kelly gazed coldly at Zorn; then turned to the officer. "Open up your collar!" he said grimly. Connolly complied awkwardly, and in another second a gasp went round the table. Wide, livid scars zigzagged in every direction on the muscular neck.

It was Zorn's turn to flush deeply. "Sorry," he said quickly, "—damn' sorry!"

Jules raised his head. "Officer," he said, "did you notice any peculiar odor on the scene of your adventure?"

Connolly looked startled. "Why, yes sir! Now that you mention it, there was a smell something like a skunk; but I didn't connect it up with the other things. Come to think of it though, I do believe it came from the things I was fightin'."

JULES nodded. "Yes," he said slowly, "it did! Officer, would you like to know what the things were that attacked you?"

"I sure would!" grinned Connolly. The others leaned forward with sudden interest.

"They were weasels," said Jules quietly.

The others merely gaped at him. Zorn threw himself back in his chair with a snort. Utter astonishment showed on every face except that of the Chairman.

"B-But, sir—" began the officer eagerly, finding his voice, when the scientist interrupted him.

"I know what you are going to say.—You would say that weasels are tiny animals which prey upon rats and chickens, and that there are no weasels large enough to attack a man."

"Which there aren't!" put in Zorn disgustedly.

Dr. Jules raised his hand wearily. "Please hear me!" he said. "The unhappy truth is that there do exist weasels of that size and vitality, and I—" he drew his hand across his forehead, "—I am responsible for their existence! I am responsible for the six ghastly deaths we know of and for all those which are to come—which must inevitably come. . . . "

Here his voice trailed into silence. He appeared to have aged ten years in an hour. Again he buried his face in his hands.

All present gazed at him with startled looks, as if suddenly doubting his sanity—all except the Chairman, who now cleared his throat.

"I am sure," he said softly, "that Dr. Jules exaggerates his responsibility in the matter. I, at least, must share it with him. A year ago he came to me, because of my position in the Public Health Department, and warned me that there was danger from these animals of his. I must admit that it was some time before he succeeded in convincing me that the matter was in any way serious.

"The affair received very little publicity then; even the reporters would have none of it—most of them, anyway. Finally, however, I got a search going. We pretty well combed the North Shore as far out as Port Washington, but turned up nothing definite. Dr. Jules was not satisfied, but I was—and that was the end of it."

Major Zorn, in whose expressive face, incredulity and astonishment were mingled, now spoke in an awed tone. "Good Lord, it isn't possible! Why, I've hunted weasels—I know what they're like. A weasel that size would be a match for any ten men!"

Jules looked up. "You are right," he said bitterly. "They can run like the wind, stop and turn in a flash, and I have seen them make leaps of fifty feet and more. Some of their movements are so quick as to be invisible to the human eye."

Inspector Kelly whose mouth had been hanging open for the last five minutes now burst into violent speech. "But where did you see 'em—where did they come from? What the hell is this all about, anyway?"

Jules looked at the Chairman. "Dr. Matthews, my story is not long. May I tell it now—in my own way?"

"Yes," said the Chairman, "it is certainly in order now.

Jules started speaking with an obvious effort to be calm and clear. His hands were folded on the table; and he stared steadily at them, never shifting his gaze.

"Up to a time just about ten years ago," he began, "I was a member of the staff of the Zoology Department at Cornell University. I was also extremely interested in that division of physics which deals with the vibration of ether waves (the waves that, among other things, produce light and color, as you doubtless understand).

"I was particularly absorbed, naturally, in the effects which ether waves of certain frequencies of vibration—particularly the X-ray—have upon animal life. It had already been definitely established at that time (and I may say with all modesty that I was one of those who aided in the proof) that X-ray treatments have a marked effect upon the reproduction functions of animals.

"The effect is briefly this: when an animal is exposed to X-rays for a sufficient length of time, any physical peculiarities which it may have—such as size, vitality, disposition, or even deformity—will inevitably be repeated in its offspring. The fact is rather wellknown by now, and will be no surprise to most of you."

His audience—including Connolly who, at a smile from the Chairman and a gesture from Kelly, had seated himself at the lower end of the table—was eagerly attentive. Several nodded their heads at this juncture.

"Immediately," continued Jules steadily, "there is opened up an extremely attractive line of activity—attractive to the scientist, at any rate. It is obviously possible, by judicious use of the X-ray treatments, to create an evolutionary process all one's own; that is, to deliberately influence the development of an animal species along pre-determined lines. All that is needed is time, patience, and—incidentally—money.

"I was immensely enthusiastic, but I lacked that last requirement. And then, suddenly, I got it! A wealthy relative died, leaving me all that he possessed."

CHAPTER III

Dr. Jules' Story

HE paused with a faint, reminiscent smile; but as nobody spoke, he quickly continued.

"I shall not attempt to describe to you my joyous enthusiasm at the time; but I should, perhaps, explain a little more fully the reason for it. For some time I had been a variance with most of my colleagues and others working in the field concerning the type of experiments which were being conducted. They seemed to me to be non-productive, brutal, and even ghastly.

"The almost universal practice was to treat deformed animals with the X-ray in order to observe the deformities repeated in the offspring. Two-headed rats, four-legged chickens, and such monstrosities were created by the hundreds. As an inveterate animal-lover, I was in a constant state of anger and indignation at these purposeless operations. What appeared to me to be worthwhile, as I have already intimated, was the development and perfection of animal species—not their degradation.

"Well, enough of that! At any rate, I was now free to do as I pleased. I had the means for my great experiment, and I resolved that it should be my life work. I would develop an animal species!"

Again Jules paused to collect himself, and this time there was an interruption.

"And I assume that as a subject you chose weasels?" questioned Zorn, speaking slowly and thoughtfully. "Why?"

"From your tone, Major Zorn, I infer that you have guessed the reason," smiled Jules. Then his face became very serious, as he continued, "I chose them because of those very characteristics which make them so dangerous now—their immense vitality, the eager manner in which they go about the functions of living, and the ease with which they may be fed. I fixed upon them after long consideration and study. I wish now that I had not," he added simply.

There was no boredom or lack of interest in the group now. His seven listeners gazed intently at Jules as if trying to guess what was coming next. He continued in a low voice, without looking up.

"There was, among my newly-acquired properties, a small island in the Sound about two miles from the Long Island shore. It had been used for a summer home. Without hesitation I fixed upon it as an ideal scene for my activities.

There I should be unmolested—and I did not desire publicity. There, I imagined my animals would be effectively confined.

"I resigned from the University, and set about collecting and setting up my elaborate X-ray apparatus. From various parts of the country—and at considerable expense—I obtained a large number of live weasels. From among these I chose ten only—the very largest, finest, and healthiest. These I treated and turned loose upon my island. I had in my employ several good men who quickly became proficient in catching and handling the animals. . . .

"I shall not go into details here concerning my work, but shall merely sketch briefly the developments that took place in the ensuing ten years. That will bring us up to date.

"Suffice it to say that from the very start I was successful. The broods of my original ten consisted, almost without exception, of very fine animals. But again I treated only those of the greatest size and vitality—about fifteen in number. The others I got rid of, naturally.

"At first, of course, progress was very slow. I did not spend all of my time on the island—that was not necessary. I did a good deal of laboratory work and study at Columbia University. But later on matters speeded up so that practically all of my time was occupied on the island.

"In three years' time, there was an appreciable difference in size between my animals and the ordinary weasel. I had some specimens fourteen inches long.* The next year I treated specimens twice the size of the common animal. I observed with immense satisfaction that their agility was increasing in proportion to their size. I knew then without a doubt, that I was creating a new species.

"It was at this time that I began to notice a remarkable development, which I had anticipated only in part. I had known that a subsidiary effect of the X-ray treatments upon animals was to increase the frequency of their reproductive activities, but had not expected any such remarkable results as I obtained in that line. Daily I became more and more astonished at the ever-increasing number of my animals. Estimating it as closely as I was able, I found that their numbers were increasing at a rate of at least ten a day. This rate of reproduction, I may as well say now, has been increasing somewhat in the manner of a geometric progression ever since!"

"GOOD Lord!" exclaimed Zorn—then: "Go on, please; I didn't mean to interrupt."

"At the end of five years practically all of my time was occupied with my work upon the island. Things were happening a thousand times faster than I had expected, or even hoped. The increase in size of the creatures was actually noticeable from month to month, due to their extremely rapid breeding and the accumulative hereditary tendencies resulting from my persistant X-ray treatments.

"I was elated. No apprehension or misgivings found place in my mind, even when the creatures became so large and strong as to be quite difficult to handle. I was still treating only the finest specimens. (At the time of treatment, they were also branded for convenience in identification.) The others were slain, and quickly disposed of, I can assure you. Weasels have no cannibalistic scruples!

"Well, to be brief, things progressed faster and ever faster, until, finally, the project got out of control. Year after year, I pursued my work with a fanatical zeal—as it seems now. I believe that my assistants thought I was mad.

"Feeding became more and more difficult and expensive. The island swarmed with the creatures.

"It was in the eighth year that they finally developed to the point where they were seriously dangerous. One of my assistants was attacked, and badly wounded. It may sound strange to you, but it is true—that we walked around in light suits of chain mail, which I had specially made to protect our bodies. After a time, however, it became impossible to go out without being knocked down and badly bruised. The end was near. . . .

"One by one, my men left me; and further treatments became impossible. And at last, a year ago, I was forced to definitely abandon the project. As I thought it over, I found that I could do this cheerfully; for, after all, my experiment had been a success. . . ."

"Decidedly!" murmured Dr. Matthews, almost to himself.

"A few of the creatures, which I had managed to confine in steel cages, I took away with me for purposes of study and exhibition when I should make public the report of my work. The remainder, I left to their fate—there seemed to be nothing else to do. . . ."

Now a shadow passed across the narrator's face, and he appeared to be in danger of losing the self-control which he had maintained so long. His lips tightened, and his brow furrowed.

"A few days before my final departure from the island," he resumed, "I had observed with some trepidation a number of the creatures taking to the water on the south side and swimming off in the direction of the Long Island shoreline. The thought of this happening preyed upon my mind continually, and a week later I drove my launch back to the island.

"Without the necessity of landing I quickly saw that there was an almost unbroken line of them swimming strongly towards the mainland. I followed their course, and there was no doubt that a number were reaching their destination. I was astounded—it had never occurred to me that they would or could do such a thing. . . ."

As he paused, Enright Healy, who had hitherto kept silence, spoke thoughtfully. "The rats from the dumps on Riker's Island were swimming over there for years, before we managed to exterminate them."

"True," admitted Jules uncomfortably, "I should have forseen it. . . . I was mad—or foolish—I don't know what. . . .

"Well!" he said more loudly, pulling himself up, "you have my story. I went to Dr. Matthews, as he has told you. He was very kind; he did

*The average common weasel is nine inches long.

his best—but it was like searching for a needle in a haystack. . . . "

"Thank you, Dr. Jules!" said the Chairman, rising. "Now, gentlemen, I think we have most of the facts; but let us sum up. With his permission, I shall ask Dr. Jules a few questions."

Ready For Action

THERE was considerable restlessness around the table now, as not a few of the Commissioners looked as if they would like to speak; but the Chairman continued.

"We have, then, on a small island two miles or so from the Queens shoreline, a large colony of the animals which Dr. Jules has described to us. We have good reason to believe, moreover, that there is a colony—or colonies—on Long Island itself; and that more are arriving all the time. These animals are definitely dangerous to human beings, are they not, Dr. Jules?"

"They are," said Jules. "We have evidence of that!"

"And there is good reason to believe that they are steadily becoming more dangerous?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because they are doubtless multiplying with tremendous rapidity, and because—" here Jules paused, and then concluded with extreme earnestness, "—because they are getting hungry!"

"Will you explain that a little more clearly?"

"I am convinced that the weasels have up to now been subsisting on the rats and other small animals which are plentiful in the low-lying regions where they live. This supply is now becoming exhausted, and they are turning to larger game."

"Yes! Well, gentlemen, we have the facts; and are prepared to consider whatever suggestions any of you may have." Matthews looked around, and sat down.

"Obviously," burst out Healy, "the first thing to do is to clean up that colony on the island!" A plane with bombs—both gas and explosive—would do it in ten minutes."

"I don't know—" began Dr. Jules doubtfully.

"Obviously!" repeated Healy, fixing the other with an unfriendly eye.

"Please don't misunderstand me," said Jules wearily. "I have no objection to the killing of the creatures; in fact, I have spent the better part of a year studying how it could best be done. . "

"Well, it doesn't seem so complicated to me," assured Healy complacently. "We'll kill 'em—don't worry!"

"By the method you suggest, you will certainly drive them from the island; but as to your killing many of them, I doubt it!"

"Now look here," reassured Healy, "I can have a dozen police launches and a hundred men on hand—with plenty of ammunition. I don't think that any of those beasts of yours will get very far by swimming!" He turned to the Chairman. "How does that sound?"

Matthews looked around the table questioningly. There was a murmur of assent.

"I move," said a Commissioner, "that Mr. Healy be empowered to carry out his plan."

"All in favor," said Matthews, rising, "so signify!"

Five Commissioners so signified. Jules never looked up.

"Carried!" said the Chairman decisively. "Now I suggest that we turn our attention to the problem in Queensboro itself." He reseated himself.

"There, of course," pointed out Zorn, "is a different proposition. They are not all collected for us; they are scattered over a large territory. As far as I can gather," he added in annoyance, "nobody has ever had a sight of one!"

"Yes," admitted Matthews, "but we know pretty well the kind of place they live in. Dr. Jules, with his knowledge of their habits, should be able to indicate pretty well the places most infested."

Dr. Jules nodded. "I have here a map on which I have outlined, to the best of my ability, the danger areas." He passed it across the table. "As you can see, the two worst spots are the extensive dumps and marshes west of Flushing and the marshes between Bayside and Douglastown. I am certain that there is a considerable colony at each of those places."

"Good!" exclaimed Matthews, "now we are getting somewhere."

"It seems clear," offered Healy, "that the first thing to do is surround those places—lay a regular picket line."

"You bet!" agreed Inspector Kelly violently. "We don't want any more people killed—that's a bad business! Six is enough! But it'll take an awful lot of men," he added, shaking his head worriedly.

Major Zorn, who had long since gotten over his annoyance and was now as keenly interested as anyone, spoke heartily. "That's where I come in, Inspector! I can have two hundred men on the spot in a couple of days and five hundred within a week. What about it?"

"That's the stuff!" Kelly grinned with relief and enthusiasm. "We'll picket 'em so even a cat couldn't get out!"

"You will not be dealing with cats," reminded Jules in a troubled voice. "Your plan is, of course, the only possible one at the moment; but I must warn you in all earnestness that every man will be in serious danger. Why, one of the creatures could leap clear over the head of a standing man—or more likely upon his head!" he finished grimly.

"Well, we can see, and we can shoot, I guess!" contended Kelly confidently. "We might even make some little sallies into the enemies' territory—eh, Major?"

Zorn smiled, and nodded; but it was to Jules that he spoke. "I suppose the real action will be at night?" he questioned.

"Exactly! The weasels do most of their hunting then. During the daylight hours they stick pretty close to their burrows. You will need all the light you can get."

"Bonfires and searchlights," murmured Zorn. "We'll do the best we can."

CHAPTER IV

The Offensive Begins

AGAIN the Chairman rose, and went through the formality of taking the vote which was this time unanimous. "Now, gentlemen, we are not quite out of the woods," he continued, smiling. "To finish the job up right we must exterminate the species; and it is supremely urgent that we get after the animals in Queensboro without delay."

For the third time Healy was first with a suggestion. "Why not use the same tactics? When we have the bad spots well surrounded we can bomb the things from a plane—not with gas, of course, but—"

Dr. Jules leaped excitedly to his feet. "Mr. Chairman! I am strongly opposed to the suggestion. It won't work. I know—" here he hesitated, looking desperately around the board. The sympathies of the group were not with him. Suddenly, however, he had a saving idea. "Mr. Chairman, I suggest that Mr. Healy wait to observe the results of his attack on the island before he tries it on the mainland!"

Matthews looked around. Several were nodding thoughtfully. "That seems quite reasonable," he agreed. "We must, of course, proceed with caution." He looked questioningly at Healy.

"I agree," said that gentleman shortly.

Jules sank down with a sigh of relief. The Chairman, however, now looked at him inquiringly. "Dr. Jules mentioned a while ago that he has been working for some time on our present problem. Undoubtedly he will have an alternative suggestion."

Jules' whole manner suggested that this was a question he had been dreading. Pain and uncertainty were only too evident in his expression.

"You gentlemen will think me a fool," he began brokenly, "when I admit that I have only one meagre idea—and that not at all sure of success. I may exaggerate the deadliness of those—those damnable creatures—I don't know. . "

"But what I do know," he continued with a haggard seriousness that drew the astonished attention of all, "is that mankind has never had to deal with anything like them before! I, who long ago objected to monstrosities, have created monsters a thousand times more horrible. They are not creatures of this earth—they are products of my rash and mistaken science. Through my criminal efforts hundreds—nay, thousands—of innocent human beings shall meet their deaths. God!—I—"

"Now, Dr. Jules," put in Matthews kindly, "I am sure it is not as bad as all that! Hadn't you better tell us your plan?"

To the relief of all, this suggestion appeared to calm the scientist. When he spoke his manner was almost businesslike.

"Yes—yes! Well, two months ago I hit upon a weapon which I believed could be used against them. As a test I tried it on those that I had confined. They died—and I was glad! I hated them—they were vicious and evil—their red eyes stared at me horribly—"

"And the weapon was?" reminded Matthews.

"Disease! For weeks since then I have been working day and night to perfect a serum which is now ready to be used. . . . "

"Humph!" grunted Healy, and his tone reflected the attitude of a number of the Commissioners. Others, however, appeared keenly interested.

"Your idea is to capture a number of the animals and inoculate them, in the hope that they will spread the disease?" offered Zorn.

"Yes—and I am anxious to see what I can do," he looked appealingly at the Chairman.

"To me," stated Matthews, "Dr. Jules' idea seems very good. Its one drawback is, of course, that the process would be slow. But we should, in my opinion, be guilty of extreme negligence if we failed to take advantage of the services of one who knows more about the subject in hand than all the rest of us put together!" He smiled around the table.

"I propose," said Zorn instantly, "that Dr. Jules be given free rein to act as he sees fit—as I have no doubt that he is anxious to give all his time to this matter; and that he be empowered to call upon me or upon Inspector Kelly for any helpers that he may need at any time."

There was no opposition to this motion, and the vote was unanimous.

Kelly stirred uneasily in his chair. "It seems to me," he burst out suddenly, "—'though it may be a small matter—that Dr. Jules ought to have somebody with him—regular, I mean. . . . . Like a body-guard, because it's goin' to be dangerous business." He paused uncertainly; then grinned. "If a big-shot gangster gets five or six, the doctor ought to rate one—anyhow!"

"Very true, Inspector!" agreed Matthews.

Jules was looking much happier, now that his work was definitely cut out for him. "Then I have a request to make," he said. "I have been very much impressed by the bravery and efficiency of Officer Connolly on that horrible night. I should be delighted if I could have him with me—that is, if he would like it. . . . "

Connolly's eager face left no doubt on that score.

"No trouble at all!" said Kelly heartily.

"Then, gentlemen," said the Chairman, rising, "I think we have done all that we can, for the time being. Has anyone anything further to say?"

There was no word.

"Then let us adjourn. Undoubtedly we shall meet again—let us hope, cheerfully. For the present, I think I am safe in saying that we have earned our lunch!"

IN the bright morning sunlight, three days later, a procession of ten police launches filed through Hell Gate; and, passing close to Welfare and Riker's Islands, roared out upon the waters of the Sound.

Officer Pat Connolly—very proud of his new official status—leaned over the rail of the foremost and largest launch, gazing cheerfully ahead. Beside him, on a heavy standard, stood a machine gun of business-like appearance; and upon the

top of this his right hand rested in proprietary fashion.

Dr. Jules, who had been talking to the pilot, now came forward, and stood beside him. His appearance and whole demeanor were considerably improved. Action of any sort was a tonic after long days and nights of worry and dread.

"Well, Officer," he greeted cheerfully, "I guess you are planning a little revenge party;—is that it?"

Half unconsciously Connolly raised a hand to his throat. "That's right, sir," he agreed devoutly, "I'm goin' to pot a few of the beasts if Lizzie here don't clog on me!"

Jules regarded the vicious-looking weapon. "You understand this type of gun?"

"Sure do! Used one all through the war. . . Took it to bed with me, even—'cause it was most generally warm, y'see."

The other smiled; but his thoughts were already upon other matters.

"That's how I happened to get this one this morning," explained Connolly.

For a time both men were silent, gazing abstractedly at the foamy waves which dashed away from the side of the speeding boat. Then:

"Have you seen the morning papers?" asked Jules in a peculiar voice.

"Yes sir," said Connolly, shifting uneasily. The scare headlines proclaiming the news of three more casualties during the night still danced unpleasantly before his eyes. Each morning they were larger and more terrifying. All the front pages now carried boxes with statistics; "Known Dead—9, Missing—6, Wounded—3, (all policemen)"—so ran the morning's score. Editorial departments were in a seething rage.

"It's bad, sir; but Zorn's coming in today with a regular army. Things'll be better tonight."

"Let us hope so, Connolly!" breathed Jules fervently. But after a pause he persisted: "Did you happen to read last night's *Star?*"

"Why, yes sir," admitted the other, still more uncomfortably. Then he burst out hotly, "An' of all the damn'—excuse me, sir!—of all the crazy bunk I ever seen—! 'Criminal negligence', huh?—why they practically called you a murderer—an' you workin' an' sweatin' blood! What've they been doin'? Gosh, I—"

"Thank you, Connolly!" interrupted Jules quietly. "But a good deal of what they say is true. I have been as a child playing with fire."

Officer Connolly shook his head, grumblingly, and subsided. They listened to the swish of the water, as the launch raced onward. The ugly shoreline of Astoria had now slipped by, and they were further out, opposite Corona.

"A beautiful morning!" commented Jules.

It was. In the sunlight the little, dancing waves shone and flashed brilliantly. In a cloudless sky the April sun was getting warm for the first time, and the dozen or so policemen on the deck sprawled in lazy attitudes, obviously enjoying themselves.

"How much farther is it, sir?"

"Look almost straight ahead—a little to the left."

Connolly saw a tiny island, dark against the brightness of the water. He studied it curiously as it grew before them. It was well wooded, though the trees were not large; and soon he made out a great, low, rambling house near the center.

"I don't see anything alive, sir," he complained.

"Wait!"

The launch had now dropped to half speed, and was nosing in towards the shore. The others followed suit, and ranged themselves at random along side.

"Watch!" exclaimed Jules suddenly.

A kingfisher, which had been swooping and darting above them, had now retired to the shore, and come to rest on the bare branch of a tree some fifteen feet above the ground.

"What, sir?"

"The bird, man—the bird! See?—on the—"

From a clump of bushes a dark streak shot into the air. The startled bird was snatched viciously as it attempted to fly; and a great brown creature dropped lightly to the ground, already mauling its prey.

The Attack!

THE men on the boat gazed at it—open-mouthed, silent. The long, powerful body was humped in the center, like a great bent spring; the head was bullet-shaped and ugly; there was about the whole animal a suggestion of terrible power and deadliness that sent shivers up and down Connolly's neck. He hated it instinctively—it was somehow repulsive—evil. .

"Gosh!" he breathed, "weasels was never meant to be that big!"

Jules answered him grimly. "You are right, Officer Connolly! What nature never meant to do, I have done. . . . "

There were excited exclamations as, drawn by the scent of blood, several more of the creatures appeared; two—five—seven—a dozen, writhing about and uttering harsh, screaming cries. But nothing was left of the meagre prey except a few feathers, and within a minute the shore was again unoccupied. Loud comment and conversation, mingled with jokes of the "Let's go ashore and have a picnic!" type, broke out upon all the boats.

"No—nature never meant those things to be," continued Jules sadly. "To a scientist is given great power—for knowledge is power. If he is a rash fool, and uses it to tamper with nature's plans, he must pay—and others must pay. . . "

Officer Connolly was beginning to wish fervently that he had held his peace, when a low drone in the sky created a diversion.

"Here she comes!" he exclaimed.

"I must speak to the officer in charge," muttered Jules; and, turning, he walked quickly aft.

Their engines picking up, the launches swung around, and retreated from the island. At a distance of a quarter of a mile they formed in an orderly line about a hundred feet apart. The plane—a huge tri-motored bomber—now circled lazily above them.

Connolly—suddenly bewildered—was relieved when, a moment later, Dr. Jules rejoined him.

"Say!" he objected, "I thought we were going to surround them."

"Captain Jones agrees with me that we had best concentrate our forces on the south side," explained Jules. "The animals that start north will not be likely to get anywhere."

"Gee! I'm dumb," admitted the other sheepishly. "Guess I expected 'em to swim all the way to Connecticut!"

"I doubt whether many will try it; they will come this way. They have uncanny instincts." He looked worriedly up and down the line. "I'm afraid our force is very weak," he muttered. "I tried my best to get them to send more boats and men, but—"

From the top of the cabin behind them three shots rang out—a prearranged signal to the men above. With a roar the plane swooped over the island. In the clear air the falling projectile was easily seen. . . .

BOOM!

Into the air shot a great column of dirt and debris.

"Hope he keeps right on bein' a good shot!" grinned Connolly, as the plane circled back. "Boy, I'm glad the wind is blowing north! When he starts usin' gas we don't have to wear these things." He kicked a mask lying on the deck.

"We wouldn't use much gas otherwise," commented Jules. "There are the people on the shore to think about. . . ."

BOOM! BOOM!

"Coupla bull's-eyes!" exulted Connolly; and then, suddenly: "Good night!—Look!"

The whole shore and visible surface of the island appeared to be moving—swirling, eddying, leaping. Angry, unearthly screams filled the air.

"There's millions of 'em!" he gasped; and, tight-lipped, set to work at his gun. "Gotta get Lizzie ready!"

The great plane had circled again.—CRASH!

"Gas!" shouted Connolly; suddenly he seemed to freeze—"What about ships out in the Sound? Good night!"

Jules was quick to reassure him. "A general warning has been circulated for three days. It is this wind that we have been waiting for, you see.

"There you are!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Get ready!"

A HUNDRED yards out something was moving towards them in the water. Small ripples in the form of a V stretched out behind it.

"You can come a little nearer, Mister," greeted Connolly grimly. "I ain't goin' to waste no shots on you!" He squatted behind his machine, waiting. The thing came steadily on. Soon they could see its bullet head and red eyes. . . .

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat!

It swerved to the left, but did not stop. Five more shots, Connolly pumped out. Now its pace slowed, and its course became irregular.

"Good night!" he growled disgustedly, "Do I have to put enough lead in 'em to sink 'em?"

"You are not shooting dogs," reminded Jules.

"Well, that's all he gets," decided the officer, "'cause here's another!" He swung his machine around, and again it rattled forth a stream of lead.

Now desultory firing had begun all up and down the line. Steadily the volleys became more prolonged, as there came from the island an ever-increasing number of the swimming animals. Soon the surface of the water was dotted with their heads—poor targets at the best.

The men lined the rails, firing steadily—loading and reloading with swift intentness. Faster and more desperately they worked as their targets multiplied from tens—to hundreds—to thousands. . . .

On and on the battle raged. The banging of rifles, the rattle of machine guns, the sharp whine of ricochetting bullets, the occasional explosions from the island—all merged into a terrific uproar which never slackened.

"They're gettin' by!" shouted Connolly, viciously slamming a fresh magazine into his gun.

Dr. Jules, who had long since found a weapon, and was using it to the best of his ability, merely nodded.

It was true. Long lines of moving heads stretched away behind the boats. Connolly snatched a moment to look around. "About half!" he snapped, and swore bitterly. He ducked involuntarily as a glancing bullet whistled over his head. Some of the men, demoralized, were shooting between the boats.

"Hell!" said he.

Captain Jones, a stock, red-faced man, leaped to the top of the cabin. "Shoot north, yu fools!" he bellowed. "One shot to a beast!" The word was passed along. Jones came puffing forward.

"No use chasin' 'em up, Doctor—with more comin' all the time—huh?"

Jules nodded.

"We're runnin' low on shells," said the Captain heavily. "Can't keep this up forever!"

Again Dr. Jules merely nodded. His face was set and hard. He fired regularly—methodically.

On and on went the steady din. Men sweated and swore at jammed guns or mislaid ammunition. Time passed. . . .

And then—shortly after noon—the firing slackened. Ammunition was giving out. Some boats had none at all, and the men stood around, helpless and irritable. The numbers of the swimming animals had greatly decreased, but soon those that still came went past unmolested. The battle was over. . . .

Officer Connolly, his last round of shots fired, spat disgustedly at his smoking weapon. His face, lined with sweat and grease, showed discouragement and an ever-rising hint of something more. He looked at Dr. Jules hesitantly—almost pleadingly. . . .

"We ain't done much good, have we sir?"

Slowly Jules turned, and looked at him from haggard eyes.

"We have done immeasurable harm," he said tonelessly.

CHAPTER V

The Enemy Retaliates

ON a lonely and unused road, their figures vaguely outlined in the night, ten men played at a grim game—grim in its very simplicity. As

they strolled aimlessly about, or stood talking softly in groups and pairs, there appeared in their manner and bearing a certain tense expectancy.

They were within the danger zone. At a radius of two miles there stretched around the spot a circle of blazing fires and white, darting lights, which was the picket line. No cars now passed along the road which, two weeks ago, Officer Connolly had used; and the remote circle of light served only to make darker the place where the men waited.

Strapped about the neck of each was a high collar of heavy leather; and at the belt, in addition to an automatic of large caliber, hung a small, strongly built instrument resembling a doctor's syringe. Five were policemen, four—militiamen, and the last—Dr. Jules.

Jules' call for "nine men willing to undertake a very dangerous but necessary work" had been speedily answered. With his picked volunteers about him he had briefly explained what must be done; outlined the advantages and disadvantages of different methods of procedure; and, finally, divulged his own daring plan. The men's first astonishment had quickly turned to enthusiasm and hearty approval. . . .

"Of course, gentlemen," Jules had explained, in conclusion, "there is little danger of a mass attack unless blood is drawn. The creatures are, essentially, lone hunters; but the scent of blood will draw them by the hundreds. If, therefore," he emphasized seriously, "so much as a drop of blood is shed, we must retreat. We shall have two armoured cars for that purpose, and they will be ready tonight with all necessary equipment.

"I cannot tell you how grateful I am for your cooperation and faith in me. . . . I—I—Well, goodbye until tonight!"

Afterwards, Patrolman Dugan, speaking to his friend Connolly, nodded his head weightily; and declared, "I don't know much about these here scientists, as a general thing—but there's one that's a *man!*"

"You said it!" agreed Officer Connolly.

Now, on the scene of action, Dr. Jules paced up and down impatiently, his head bent, his hands clasped behind his back. To the occasional remarks addressed to him he replied in curt monosyllables or mere gestures. The constant strain under which he laboured made it difficult for him to be friendly. The men realized this; and, during the nights they had spent with him, had come to respect him tremendously for it.

"Yes," said Connolly, conversing in low tones with Patrolman Dugan, "he's the only guy on this job that knows what he's doin'. You oughta seen that big shot Healy eatin' out of Doc's hand after he pulled that boner bombin' the island! 'Yes, Doctor!' was all he sez when Doc tells him to start gettin' in a big supply of lumber an' concrete an' buildin' materials. . . . "

"What for?" gaped Dugan.

"Well, I don't rightly know," said the other, scratching his head, "but this is a bigger thing than most people realizes—except Doc. . . . You can be sure that—"

With a thud and loud, startled exclamation one of the men who had wandered slightly apart from the group toppled to earth. The others faced about, straining to see. The game was on. . . .

Even as the great creature upon him tore angrily at his protecting collar the prostrate man snatched the syringe from his belt. Deep into the furry body he jabbed the sharp needle. . . .

"Come!" he yelled breathlessly as he pressed home the plunger.

His nine companions pounded forward, shouting and discharging their pistols into the air. Their violent sally had the desired effect. In a flash the attacker was gone. An angry scream floated back. . . .

"Four for me!" gasped the shaken man, struggling to his feet. Ruefully he rubbed the back of his head. "I think we oughta spread some mattresses around to fall on!"

"DON'T worry," grinned Connolly, critically examining the other's collar, "there's one more weasel that'll have worse than a headache by mornin'! Let's see—that makes twenty-seven sick weasels in four nights. Not bad. . . . "

"Let us hope that there are three times that many by this time!" amended Dr. Jules, who, with the help of a flashlight, was busy recharging the syringe from a bottle which he carried.

Swiftly the men were reloading guns. Half-filled magazines were not popular. . . . "If you can't scare 'em away, let 'em have it direct!" was the first law of the game. That had been necessary once. You had to be a good shot. . .

Suddenly a long, harsh wail rent the air, rising and falling, ever growing louder. The men peered into each other's faces in quick surprise.

"What the—?"

"Siren!"

"Comin' this way—"

Down the hill from Douglaston roared a great car. Behind it came another—and yet another—more. . . .

"Off the road!"—the men retreated.

"Squad cars!" muttered Connolly, "—a whole percession! They gone crazy?"

Now they were thundering past. The last one slowed with a squealing of rubber. A hoarse shout:

"The beasts are runnin' wild in Flushing. . . . Need every man!"

It was gone.

"Come!" snapped Jules.

They tumbled into their two cars; and, motors sputtering into life, swung around and took the trail. Up the hill, past the line of gaping soldiers—through Bayside. Down the wide boulevard, lined with running crowds—past Auburndale. On to Murray Hill. . . .

Jules was rattling out directions through tight lips.

"Attics—tops of houses—cellars!. . . . Get the other men—scatter—spread the word. . . . Remember, windows are no protection unless high up!. . . . The devils will be blood-mad—no let-up 'til morning. . . . Fight!"

As they bore down upon Flushing, there met them an evergrowing wave of sound—a pan-

demonium of shots, yells, and screams—the wild, angry screams of the hunters—the terrified, helpless cries of the hunted. Figures ran stumblingly, futilely through the streets—other figures leaped and bounded with deadly accuracy.

The cars careened into brightly-lighted Main Street, and one by one the men leaped to the ground—only to stand frozen for a moment by what they saw. Then, cursing bitterly, they sprang into action, passing back Jules' orders to those behind, dispersing in all directions.

"Oh, good God!" groaned Jules. Connolly's face was red with fury.

The broad street was strewn with bodies of the dead and dying. The rows of shops, where people had vainly sought shelter behind fragile glass, were rows of human slaughter houses. And still there ran and leaped and screamed the blood-crazed killers. Among them, hundreds of dauntless but hopelessly confused soldiers and policemen ran in circles, firing futile shots. Upper windows were lined with pale, horror-stricken faces.

"Look out!" barked Connolly—too late. From the doorway of a shop hurtled a long, lithe form, flinging Jules violently to earth. His eyes blazing, the officer took careful aim; and fired four times. As the beast sprung away there came panting up to them a man in uniform, hatless and blood-stained. It was Major Zorn.

"Doctor," he entreated, "get out of this Hell —you will be needed—your life is precious—"

"No!" grated Jules, struggling up, "I have work here. . . . Where is Kelly?"

"At the subway station."

"Are the trains running?"

"As best as the mob will let 'em; but they're crazy wild, fighting and trampling each other to get in. Kelly's got two hundred men there trying to stand off the beasts, but it's only a matter of time. . . . "

"Are the beasts spreading out?"

"Up every street!—diving through windows—God!"

"Send squads of men up every street," snapped Jules. "Get the people in attics—doors locked!"

"Right!"

"Drive to the subway, Connolly!"—and Jules leaped into the nearest car. In four minutes they were there.

"Kelly!"

"What?—what the—"

"Kelly!—I want six men!"

"Here, six of you—pile in that car! All right, Doctor?"

"Can I have you for five minutes?"

"Shoot!" snapped Inspector Kelly, leaping to the running board.

"To the local telephone exchange!" directed Jules.

A World Awakened

ON the way he shouted to Kelly the outlines of his plan.

"Good!" nodded the officer grimly, "—they'll do it, all right!"

"Bars on the windows!" breathed Jules, as they skidded to a stop before a small, square building, "—Wonderful!"

They burst in.

"Chief Operator!" bellowed Kelly.

A small, frightened man came forward. "Yes—?"

"We want every line yu got. . . . You're goin' to call every number yu got!. . . . "

"B-But, sir, it would take a long time. . . . "

"I don't give a damn how long it takes! Start now! Here's six men to help yu if you're short-handed."

"But what would we say?"

"You will say," put in Jules, "these words: 'Awaken everyone. Go to your attic. Lock the door.'—That is all. You will save hundreds of lives!"

"All right—all right!" stuttered the little man. "I can use five more men. . . . See? Here and here and here—yes, that's right. . . . Now look. . . . "—excitedly he instructed them.

"An' listen—yu ain't handlin' no other calls, see?" added Inspector Kelly belligerently.

"Yes sir!"

"O.K.—Now I'm goin'. . . . "

"Take my car," offered Jules.

"Thanks!"—and Kelly flung out into the night.

The line of operators swung into action: the dialing—the wait—the crisply spoken message—the dialing—the wait. . . .

Jules, frowning, came to a decision. "Don't wait more than two minutes for an answer," he ordered. "We can't waste time."

"And now, Connolly, you and the other officer watch them, so that you can take your turns.

Outside the uproar was dying down somewhat. Screams and volleys of shots now came from widely separated points. Several times heavy bodies crashed against the bars at the window, but they caused no cessation of the work within. The clicking of the dials, the monotonous repetitions of the voices—on and on it went. Hour after hour. . . .

Ceaselessly Jules paced the floor. "Awaken everyone—go to your attic—lock the door—awaken everyone—go to your attic. . . . " His head whirled. Was there nothing else to do. For the hundredth time he racked his tired brain. Nothing!

He looked at his watch. Three-thirty! Would this awful night never end?

When an operator crumpled up, and rolled from his seat, Connolly swung into his place. "One—three—eight—seven—up!" muttered the man, and closed his eyes. Clumsily the officer to work.

On and on. . . . Jules felt that he was going mad. Still those screams! Each one cut him like a knife. Some were near, but most were far away. . . . Was ever a night so long. . . . ?

And then, of a sudden, the sky was gray; and the noise outside had ceased. They were slinking to their burrows now—he knew them well enough for that! But still he waited—waited until the first rays of the sun glanced along the ground. Then:

"Enough!" he said.

In the ghastly shambles that was Main Street, Flushing, a little group of men stood about a

prostrate figure. Silently they looked down at the body of Major Rugert Zorn, Militiaman. His head was rolled back in the gutter, his throat a red horror; his wide, sightless eyes gazed up at the day that had come too late.

A sudden stream of curses from Inspector Kelly ended in a choking sob. . . .

"He was a great guy! I got to know him good. . . ."

Without raising his head Jules spoke in a low tone, as if addressing Zorn.

"How did the whole thing start—last night?"

With an effort Kelly achieved a matter-of-fact tone. "A soldier got killed. In ten minutes there was two hundred of the brutes there. There was no holding 'em. . . ."

"There *will* be no holding them," murmured Jules. He put a hand to his forehead, swaying slightly.

"It is the end. . . . They have tasted human blood. They have known the joy of killing men. There is something new in the world—a terrible, merciless tribe—*hunters* of men. . . ."

Silently his knees doubled, and he pitched forward across the body of Zorn.

CHAPTER VI

The Exodus

BY nine o'clock that morning every roadway leading into New York was choked with loaded cars. The railroad and subway platforms bore struggling, sweating mobs; the rumbling trains were filled to the last inch of space. All day long across the East River bridges, moved unbroken lines of vehicles. Extra ferry boats and water craft of all kinds were pressed into service. The great exodus had begun. . . .

All day long the telegraph and telephone wires between New York, Albany, and Washington were worked to capacity, with the result that, shortly after noon, a state of martial law was declared to exist throughout the Boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens; and the residents of Queensboro were summarily ordered from their homes. Brooklyn, with its two million inhabitants, was a different matter.

And in a large, white hospital room in Manhattan that matter was being discussed.

" 'Protect Brooklyn'—orders from the War Department!" grated Healy. He raised his hand in an expressive gesture. " 'Protect Brooklyn'! What about all the soldiers they're sending in? About half the standing army, if I get it right. What do they plan to do if not protect Brooklyn?"

Dr. Jules stirred uneasily on the bed. "Soldiers are vulnerable. They are only human, after all. As a temporary protection, we must have them—yes." He pulled himself to a sitting posture, and continued with an incisive finality, "Healy, we must wall in Brooklyn! That is what 'Protect Brooklyn' means. I have been in constant touch with Washington for a week. I know!"

"Wall in Brooklyn? Build a wall around it?" stormed Healy.

"It is not as bad as all that. Topography favors us. Here, bring me your map!"

Healy spread it on the bed. Jules traced the lines with his forefinger. "Look! Starting down the Newtown Creek from East River—straight across to Jamaica Bay. It is scarcely seven miles. That will be all that is necessary."

"You're right!" agreed the other, relieved. "How much time have we?"

"You must move with all possible speed. See! Down the marshes of the Flushing Creek, through the low-lands and dumps of Maspeth, the creatures are spreading. No time must be lost!

"You will have thousands of willing workers at your command—only too eager to save their homes. Without trouble you will be able to commandeer trucks, vehicles of all kinds—all that you can use. . . ."

Already Healy was at the telephone, his map spread out before him. "Hello—Morris! Get a map of Brooklyn—now, get this!" Skillfully he traced the line of the fortification.

"Drop everything! Get down there. . . . Lay it out! Grab what you want from every lumber yard and builder in Brooklyn. I'll fix that. . . . Wait!"

Jules had interrupted. "Wait—this will cut your work in half: Utilize buildings and structures of all sorts. A street lined with houses—windows boarded up—is your wall half made!"

"Right!—Good! Get this Morris. . . ."

So the work was begun. Healy left for City Hall. Jules lay back with eyes closed—but in half an hour Inspector Kelly was with him.

"How you feeling, Doctor?"

"Better. I shall be up this afternoon."

"Wish you'd stay where you are 'til tomorrow. You're tuckered out! After all, there ain't nothin' to do but help the people get out. They don't need much urgin'! It's mainly a traffic job."

"I suppose you are sending a number of them farther out the island?"

"Sure!—we got to. . . . About half of them. Even at that we can never get 'em all out today. It's a mess!"

"What preparations are being made for the night?"

"We're gettin' organized. Goin' to use banks and jails—places with bars on 'em. Attics for the rest of 'em—that worked good last night. . . Gee, you done a good job!"

JULES smiled wanly. Then he became very serious.

"Do you realize, Inspector, that the whole of Long Island with the exception of Brooklyn—which we shall protect as best we can—must be evacuated before we are through with this awful business?"

Jules' associates, including Inspector Kelly, had gotten into the habit of accepting his lightest words as undoubted truths; but now the officer could not suppress an exclamation of astonishment.

"Good Lord! Why?"

"There is no other way. The territory must be surrendered. Until then our hands are tied by the very presence of human beings, and the scourge will flourish." He sighed. "Disease

has failed, since we can no longer hold the beasts from spreading."

"Well," considered Kelly slowly, "there's nothin' to keep the railroad trains from running. . . And ships will take care of the rest. . . . It'll be a big job! When it's done—what then?"

"That, I am sorry, I am not at liberty to tell you!" said Dr. Jules.

Hour after hour, throughout a day only too short, the great migration continued. Manhattan was hopelessly over-run. Every hotel, every available shelter was quickly filled to overflowing; and long, unbroken lines of the refugees stretched onward, north into New York State, west and south into New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Homeless, to a large extent destitute, they nevertheless gave thanks for their safety; and pitied those not so fortunate.

And, beginning at four o'clock, from north and south and west fleets of heavy trucks laden with soldiers entered the city; and, rumbling out across the bridges, were greeted with the heartfelt cheers of the frightened people.

As dusk began to fall, the streets cleared of humanity, as if by magic. Only soldiers remained visible, placed in large detachments at strategic points—at the heads of bridges, and, in Brooklyn, four deep along the already-well-defined line of the fortifications.

And when the long night had finally passed people poured thankfully out into the light to learn that the beasts were spreading. Even as they prepared to take the roads to safety, they told each other in awed voices of the incredible distances covered by the mad, blood-hungry killers; of the unexpected casualties away out on the island; of the soldiers that had died. . . .

This day was a repetition of the last. Dr. Jules, again on his feet and, followed by the dogged Connolly, argued relentlessly for a second great wall along the Manhattan shore of the East River. The authorities were doubtful. But that night, when there were seven violent deaths in the Bowery and three in fashionable Tudor City, he had won his point. Before noon on the morrow the labor had started. The difficulties were tremendous, but when men are desperate much can be done.

Every truck and available vehicle in the city was commandeered to haul lumber, cement, and steel from far and near. Tens of thousands of able-bodied men, skilled and unskilled, were pressed into service. At night, lines of soldiers, aided by hundreds of powerful searchlights, guarded the shore as best they could. So, day after day, the tremendous structure grew;—and in the great metropolis all ordinary business was at a standstill. . . .

Meanwhile, the evacuation of Long Island continued, proceding automatically at first, but speeded after a week by Dr. Jules who emerged from a long and constant communication with Washington with a definite order, covering the whole territory. By boat and train people abandoned their homes—and gradually, as days grew into weeks, the evacuation was complete. In many cases force had to be used. That was inevitable. Many casualties occurred—the death lists still grew. Under such conditions accidents—miscalculations—are unavoidable. But even violent death may become a commonplace. . . .

Dr. Jules left for Washington.

CHAPTER VII

Helpless!

PRECISELY a month after its first meeting, the Emergency Commission reconvened about the long table in the conference room in the Municipal Building in New York City. But where there had been seven, now there were five; and, whereas before, only one had been seriously worried, now, they were all definitely uncomfortable.

"Dr. Jules has telegraphed that he will be late," Matthews informed them.

This news was received in silence—a silence that continued minute after minute, steadily becoming more oppressive. A stranger, looking on, would have been astonished at this novel method of conducting a meeting—astonished that five such responsible looking men could sit so long and say nothing.

As a matter of fact, the silence of each was similar to that of a school boy who has not learned his lesson, and fears that at any moment his ignorance may be discovered. For each Commissioner was groping desperately in his mind for a solution to the problem which confronted them—and not finding it.

Time and again they pictured in their minds the situation. Long Island alive with dangerous creatures—real, purposeful enemies of mankind. Manhattan and Brooklyn reasonably well-protected. But the creatures multiplying with insect-like rapidity were becoming maddened by hunger. The doubtful safety of Staten Island, New Jersey, the Bronx, Westchester—all the surrounding Mainland. The fearful uncertainty of what the creatures, rendered desperate by hunger, might be capable of. . . .

Each man recalled vividly the scene along the high walls. The growing swarms of great beasts. The crowds of people covering every vantage point—packed on the roofs of buildings, lining the top of the wall itself—gazing in endless wonder and awe at these things that leaped, and screamed for their blood. . . .

Dr. Matthews cleared his throat. "Well," he said, "I see no reason why we should not discuss the situation, and consider what is to be done. I fear there is no escaping the fact that our best efforts have, up to now, been dismal failures; although I cannot see what we could have done that we did not. As a body we have done little to help matters. I need hardly say that this is our last chance. . . . Now, what is to be done?"

"I know several things that *cannot* be done—if that is any help!" answered Healy with bitter irony.

"Even negative ideas might conceivably be useful, Mr. Healy," insisted the unsmiling Matthews.

"Well, in the first place," began Healy irritably, "we can't attack the things; our hands are tied there. The whole country around is up in arms. You know what happened when we

bombed that little island! You can't blame 'em for that. *We* don't know what the beasts can do; nobody does. If a hundred thousand or more of 'em started swimming, there's not much doubt that a lot of 'em would get somewhere. . . . Then—well, I don't have to talk about that!"

There was no comment. Each man had gone over this a hundred times in his mind. The beasts running free on the mainland! Beyond that point they refused to think. . . .

"On the other hand," snarled Healy, "we can't let 'em alone, either. In another week they'll have eaten everything there is to eat—and then what'll they do? Start swimming anyway!. . "

"Couldn't we," offered one of the others hesitantly, "get a lot of boats—enough to take care of them when they started to do that?"

"Yeah!" sneered Healy, "we'd look pretty trying to stop them at night in the water, wouldn't we? If we had a net about fifty miles long we might do something towards stopping them—sure!

"To sum up, then," concluded Healy with mock ceremony, "we cannot molest the creatures, and we cannot let them alone. . . . Do I hear any suggestions?"

"Hardly a useful conclusion!" snapped Matthews.

"Hardly expected it would be!" returned the other.

Inspector Kelly's inborn dislike of bickering made him attempt a diversion.

"The other day I was talkin' to Captain Reilly—he's a Staten Island man. We came to about the same conclusions as Mr. Healy. 'Then,' says Reilly, 'there's only one thing for you to do—you got to feed 'em, and keep 'em contented!' "

THIS sally was received with silent indignation by the others, and Kelly subsided.

"Perhaps," pursued the Chairman, after a pause, "it would be suggestive for us to outline the characteristics which a weapon must have, to be used against them. First and foremost, of course, it must be something that will not drive them from the island. . . . "

"That's the whole thing!" put in Healy.

"But the minute we go after them, they'll start to swim," objected Kelly. "We can't very well try to kill them, and keep it a secret from them!"

"We must!" insisted Matthews. "There we have the first requirement: it must kill without alarming them. . . . "

"That means instantaneous death," one of the others pointed out, "—not an easy thing to try on those brutes!"

"Yes," agreed the Chairman, "unless we can attack each and every one of them at the same moment—which is, of course, ridiculous—death must come swiftly and silently so as not to alarm the others. . . . Second requirement: it must kill instantaneously."

"Some sort of odourless gas—" began the other, but even as he spoke he shook his head vigorously.

"Not geographically feasible. . . . Third requirement:" pursued Matthews methodically, "it must be under perfect control."

"Disease?"

"Much too slow!. . . . Fourth: it must do the entire work in a very short time. . . . "

"Now there's a riddle for you!" burst out Kelly.

"Yes, that is a riddle—and without an answer, I am afraid," admitted Matthews in discouragement.

A blank silence fell. Men wrestled with the problem for a moment, only to drop it in despair—and in despair they looked ahead to the consequences of their failure. . . .

"There is no such weapon," groaned Healy. "Only an Act of God could do all that!"

Silence again. Shortly after the Chairman had glanced at his watch for the fourth time, the door swung open; and Dr. Jules walked in, closely followed by Officer Connolly.

The five men looked up with immense relief. Any interruption would have been a relief just then.

"I am very sorry to be so late, but I missed a train," he apologized briskly. His step, as he came forward, was also brisk. His manner caused the men about the table to look at him intently.

"No trouble, Doctor!" greeted Matthews. "You have not missed anything of importance, I fear."

"What have you done?" Jules inquired crisply.

"Next to nothing. We have tried to conceive of a method of procedure, but the objections to all are so serious—"

"I think I understand those objections—and I think I have what you want."

They gazed at him, astonished and incredulous. He stood at the end of the table, his hands resting flat upon it; and leaned forward earnestly.

"But first I must beg from each of you a pledge of absolute secrecy. Not one word of what I am going to tell you must be repeated. I am permitted to speak to you only upon that condition.

The Death Ray!

SLIGHTLY bewildered, they quickly gave their consent. Jules continued rapidly: "Tonight, from Washington, will arrive what we need. What it is, and how it came to be, I shall briefly explain.

"As you know, I am a physicist. I have always been particularly interested in wave motion. Naturally I have studied and worked with radio waves since they were first utilized. That is why I have been closely identified with the developments which I am about to describe.

"For broadcasting purposes radio waves are sent out in all directions like ripples in the water from a falling stone or light waves from an isolated lamp. No other method of using them was known for a long time. Later, however, Marconi and others began to wonder if they might not be directed—controlled. If the light waves from a lamp could be concentrated into a beam by a reflector, they argued, why could not radio waves be treated in the same way?

"The chief obstacle in their path was their failure to produce waves short enough for the purpose. Reflectors of tremendous proportions would have been necessary to change the direc-

tion of such long waves. Improved vacuum tubes, however, later cleared up this difficulty. They got waves of approximately ten centimeters in length, which was what they wanted. Success crowned their efforts; radio beams were a fact. . . . You have, of course, heard rumors of various 'radio power' projects?"

They assented. Unable to understand where all this was leading them, they nevertheless listened with avid attention. Here was a man who spoke with authority, even though the general trend of his remarks was confusing.

"Yes! Well, the secret of it is this: when power of sufficient quantity—a few kilowatts—is concentrated in such a beam, the air in the path becomes ionized; that is, from a natural insulator it changes to a rather good conductor of electricity. The beam, therefore, becomes, in effect, the same as an ordinary copper wire, in that it can be used to transmit electric power—and no radio receiving set is needed at the other end.

"Well, so much for the underlying principle of the thing. Now we shall see how it applies to our problem. And what I say from here on, you must keep religiously to yourselves."

He looked around. They all nodded reassuringly.

"It is a lamentable fact," he continued, "that the nations of this earth are constantly preparing to do each other harm when the excuse or the necessity shall arise. Governments are continually on the lookout for new and more efficient lethal machines. It was not long before certain far-sighted individuals in our own War Department began to appreciate the possibilities of 'radio power'. Certain American scientists, who had made a specialty of the work, were summoned to Washington. Many of them are still there. That was six years ago; and now the most closely-guarded secret our government keeps is that of the development of this newest and deadliest weapon of warfare, which is no more nor less than a process of wholesale electrocution!"

He paused, as startled exclamations and murmurs of amazement broke out around the table. In another moment, however, a hush of tense expectancy prevailed. . . .

"When I first realized what a danger to mankind my experiments had created, I begged for one of the very efficient machines they possess to use on my small island. I was laughed at. I kept at them. It was discouraging; I became very unpopular. If the secret got out, they said, terrific diplomatic complications would surely ensue. . . .

"Since then they have gradually come to understand that the preservation of human life and the safety of the people at large can be of more importance than even a government secret."

"And now—?" breathed Matthews tensely, half rising from his chair.

"And now, gentlemen," concluded Jules triumphantly, "we are to use the Death Ray!"

ACROSS the bridge and into Brooklyn rolled an automobile.

"Of course, this morning we shall merely make a test. The real work must be done at night," said Dr. Jules.

"Why is that, sir?" asked Officer Connolly, who was driving.

"Because, although thousands of the famished creatures now come out of their burrows in the daytime, we cannot be sure of getting them all until night. I am sure you could have guessed that, Connolly!"

"But sir, I thought the Death Ray pierced right through everything!"

"—Except the ground," Jules finished for him. "You see, the ground is one half of the circuit—the ray being the other. Thus, things under ground are not affected. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir!"

They were heading east through Brooklyn. Hurrying crowds moved their way. . . . The rumor that something unusual was in the offing had spread fast.

"How about the young ones—them that don't come out at all?" said Connolly, struck with sudden apprehension. Then he answered himself: "Oh sure, but they would soon starve!"

"Yes. Also, I plan to keep one machine on hand long after we have finished with the others to clean up anything we may have missed. . . ."

Now they had come within sight of the great fortification, moving at a snail's pace through the dense crowd.

"Left," directed Jules. Connolly turned into the street running along the back of the wall. Three blocks more, and before them, blocking the road, stood an immense motor truck. They alighted beside it. It was larger than the largest moving van, and painted a sombre, unrelieved black. The men who worked around it wore no uniforms or insignia—merely overalls. How it had got there; why it was there; what it was—the crowd did not know, but speculation was rife as they studied it curiously from where a cordon of police held them in check.

Matthews, Healy, and the other Commissioners, who had been examining it at closer range, now greeted Jules in a body.

"Good morning, Doctor! Could you possibly find time to explain this monster to us?" asked Matthews eagerly.

"Certainly! It is really very simple. . . . Look first on top,"—he indicated what appeared to be a large searchlight on a standard projecting from the roof—"That is the wave reflector, and inside it is the antenna. That reflector is a very ingenious piece of work; not only can it be swung around in any direction and up or down, but it also can be focussed, to broaden or narrow the wave beam—just as a searchlight is focussed. Its controls, inside the truck, are coupled with the wattage supply control so that the power is increased when the beam is widened—which is of course necessary.

"Now come inside. See, here is the short-wave set, and that is the motor-driven generator which supplies the power. . . . That is all that needs explaining, I think."

"But sir," objected Connolly, after a pause during which all the others had appeared satisfied, "what about the ground connection? On a motor truck, I mean, I don't see—"

"Good, Officer! Do you see that great spool, at the back? On it is five miles of copper wire. The end is well grounded. The truck goes ahead, until it is all out. . . . Rewind by motor; ground it. . . . Repeat!"

"Smart!" approved Officer Connolly, scratching his head, admiringly. Here was science that he could understand. . . .

"How are the animals this morning?" asked Jules. "Are there enough on hand for a good experiment?"

"Just climb up, and take a look!" said Kelly, "But I guess you can hear 'em anyway."

"Yes, the question was more or less rhetorical!"—and Jules, ascending a ladder to the roof of the truck, leaped to the top of the wall. The open field which adjoined the wall at this point, was literally over-run with the lean, hungry-looking creatures. He noticed that they were under-mining the wall, and wondered how far they had got. . . .

"Well, he called, turning, "we might as well see what we can do!"

Triumph!

HASTILY his companions joined him, anxious to miss nothing.

"Please be careful not to step in front of this," cautioned Jules, placing his hand on the large reflector. "You might easily spoil our day! Ready below?"

"Yes sir!"

He directed the men at the controls, whose vision was obstructed by the wall: "Down a bit. . . To the left. . . . Right! Now, give it a ten-degree beam. . . . All ready—Shoot!. . . ."

A tremendous yell arose from the surrounding house-tops—a shout of mingled astonishment and delight.

"Boy, oh boy! Ready, aim, fire! Gosh. . ." stuttered Connolly.

For even as the word left Jules' mouth a circular group of the weasels—over thirty in number—leaped convulsively into the air; and fell back, limp and black, upon a blackened circle of earth from which all sign of grass had instantaneously melted.

"Swing left ten points!"

And, as the reflector swung around, there ran across the field at terrific speed a wave of leaping animals leaving behind it no more than a blackened swathe of their charred and lifeless bodies. The other animals scarcely noticed them, but appeared to be much more interested in the roar of the crowd.

The crowd was cheering and stamping its enthusiastic approval of the proceedings: "Finish 'em!. . . . Give 'em —give 'em the Death Ray!" That old, vague, familiar phrase was suddenly taking on real meaning before their eyes. They were not long naming it.

"Open out the beam ten degrees!" ordered Jules.

With the change of focus the black circle grew with lightning rapidity. In a moment there was nothing alive on the field. A small shack on the opposite edge was blazing brightly.

With the exception of a few muffled exclamations Jules' companions had remained silent throughout the exhibition. One by one, they now shook him silently by the hand. The crowd, sensing from this pantomime who was the hero of the occasion, redoubled its tumult. Jules gazed about him with moist, bright eyes—happy for the first time in many months. . . .

In a large automobile, headed back to Manhattan, they all talked excitedly—yet purposefully. Maps must be studied, lines of advance planned, preparations made for the night. Jules explained that the property damage would not be great, because the power of the rays had been carefully calculated to be fatal to all life, but to do as little damage beyond that as possible. Of course many wooden structures would burn—but only those with an exceptionally high moisture content. Relatively dry wood was not injured by the rays. All vegetation must be destroyed—that could not be helped. . . .

But it was not of property damage that they talked; it was of the final destruction of their hitherto unconquerable foes, and it was Officer Connolly—his jubilation making it impossible for him to keep properly silent—who best summed up the situation, when he said, "They got more X-ray than they deserved. . . . Now they're gonna get more death-ray than they want!"

* * * *

In a week the work was done. By night the great trucks rumbled along the highroads and byroads—heading ever eastward. Their great spreading rays, visible in the darkness, shone a ghastly blue as they swept relentlessly back and forth—onward and onward. By day the tireless men laboured over maps, carefully laying out the routes for the following nights. Daily the danger from the beasts became less. Millions of people breathed more freely; thousands looked forward thankfully to the time when they would return to their homes. And when, finally, the great blue rays swept over the farthermost tips of Long Island, the news aroused the nation to rejoicing; for those mysterious and terrifying creatures, the hunters of men, were no more. . . .

And the following evening seven exhausted men relaxed comfortably together, and enjoyed their after-dinner cigars.

"Yes," Healy was saying, "there is a big clean-up job to do, but there are plenty of soldiers around; and—oh, the devil with it!. . . . Lord! it's great to relax, and stop worrying!"

Inspector Kelly was looking at Dr. Jules with a twinkle in his eye. "By the way, where are all those trucks you had around here? It's funny, but they just seemed to disappear!"

"Trucks?" said Jules, innocently, "what trucks?"

"Oh, I don't know—I just seem to remember seein' some around; but where they came from or where they went, I don't know. . . . Mighty mysterious about that! Most people seem to think you just made 'em in your back yard. . ."

"I think he still has one," put in Matthews. "Just in case he should decide to 'control an evolutionary process', and need it all of a sudden!"

(*Continued on Page* 428)

The Inverted World

By **J. Rogers Ullrich**

(Illustrated by Volga)

There was a blinding greenish flash that struck Lambert squarely in the face just as the machine burst with a crash.

WHEN my friend, Dr. George Anthony, phoned me in agitated tones, to come to see him, I dressed rapidly and drove madly through the greyness of dawn to his house.

When he admitted me, he placed a finger warningly to his lips, and ushered me into his private office. His face was haggard; his eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot; his chin needed shaving; and his head looked as tousled as if he had spent the night running nervous fingers through his hair.

Finally, he showed me to a chair, fretfully adjusted the drawn shades so that no light from his office might reveal to passers-by the persons in the room and paced restlessly about the library table he used as a desk. Finally he spoke in a hoarse whisper, "I'm in trouble, and you've got to help me out."

"Take it easy, George," I said. "I saw that the minute you let me in. Now calm yourself, sit down," I drew up a chair for him, "and tell me all about it."

He sat down, twined his fingers together and rubbed his palms tensely against each other. Once he opened his mouth to speak, hesitated, summoned up his courage and began.

"The most terrible thing has happened. You know Harry Lambert, don't you?" I nodded. Harry, whom I had met socially, was head of Lambert Associates, Inc., advertising consultants, and a wealthy bachelor, of good family, and consequently known to more people than were known to him. George continued, in the same nerve-wracked whisper. "He's here!"

"Where?" I asked looking around, feeling a bit uncomfortable that his jumpiness should have communicated itself to me.

"Upstairs," he said. "This is the second day, he's been here. He just stands there, looking out the window, with his eyes wide open. He doesn't say a word, when I talk to him. I tried to get him to lie down, but he pushed me away as if he neither saw nor heard me. I took him by the arm to drag him, but I could no more move him, than I could a skyscraper. I don't know what to do."

"How did he get up there?" I askd.

"He's in my X-ray laboratory," George answered. "He came here yesterday about nine in the morning, and told me that he had a dull pain in his right cheek-bone, from a punch in a drunken brawl at a night club. It didn't bother him, until he went to bed night before last, and the pain kept him awake. I looked at it pretty carefully, but superficial examination showed neither bruise, nor fracture, so I took him up to be x-rayed."

As George paused to compose himself, I asked whether Lambert had acted queerly in any way.

"Why, not at all," was his response. "I'm to blame for his condition. That's just the trouble. It's all my stupid carelessness. If anything went wrong with him, I'd be ruined. I can't even call in another doctor."

"Get a hold on yourself, man," I shouted sharply. He placed a warning hand over my mouth, which annoyed me still further because the house, as far as I could tell from my impressions since arriving, was deserted except for the two of us, and the impassive Lambert in the laboratory, upstairs. I shook off his hand and continued, "Tell me what happened,—what you did; but don't waste time."

"All right, all right, but don't shout," he snapped at me. "I took him upstairs, posed him before the X-ray tube, adjusted the plates, and turned on the power. He was standing silently, and I meanwhile, knowing I had a moment to myself, wandered over to a table where the piece of buorlitite lay—"

"Buorlitite?" I interrupted, "what in blazes is buorlitite?"

"It's a metallic ore, possibly a meteoric fragment, that a friend of mine on a polar expedition found and sent me, knowing I would be interested. I had been examining it for some time, that is I got it about two weeks ago; sort of playing around with it, trying to fathom its chemical

J. ROGERS ULLRICH

WE have come to learn that the world we see and know is not necessarily the real world that exists. It is only the world that our senses can grasp and convey to us. We are conscious of the world only through those five senses, and it is the impressions that those senses convey to our brains that constitute our world.

It would only be necessary, therefore, that our senses be distorted in some fashion to create a new world for us. A change in color, a change in our sensual feeling of things, a change in our sound perceptions would give us a new field of existence.

What force or power could cause these changes, we do not know. But certainly there is no reason for stating that none exist. We know that many people are "afflicted", as we call it, with color blindness, which merely means that their sense of color is different from ours, and many people can hear sounds that we do not perceive. Here is a story of a "new world" thrilling and realistic.

composition. . . . "

Knowing George to be the kind of fellow who is interested in a great many things at once, being a positive fanatic in his zealous curiosity about the wonders of science, I felt that I would never get him to finish telling me about Lambert unless I kept after him. I interrupted him again.

"Save that for later. What's that got to do with Lambert?"

"Everything!" was his astonishing reply. "Everything! I picked it up idly, looked at it for a moment, turning it over in my hands, and walked back to where Lambert stood, thinking I would talk to him about it after I had finished X-raying his cheek. Then it happened.

"I hadn't stepped within six feet of him, when suddenly, the buorlitite flew from my hand, just as if some magnetic power had snatched it from me. Helplessly, faster than I can describe it, I watched it fly at the X-ray tube. Then there was a blinding greenish flash that struck Lambert squarely in the face, and knocked him down, just as the X-ray machine burst with a crash, and toppled in the other direction, away from Lambert. Otherwise it would have crushed him.

"I STOOD there for a minute petrified. Then I jumped toward Lambert, but as I started, he rose to his feet like a man in a daze, and turned automatically toward the window. I asked him what was the matter. He didn't answer. I pleaded with him to talk to me, but he acted as if I wasn't in the room. I tried to get in front of him, but he put out his arm, like a rod of iron, and shoved me aside. I grabbed his wrist, and felt his pulse. It was beating steadily, a little faster than normal, just like the pulse of a man who it watching an exciting race.

"He let me do that, as if he didn't care what I did so long as I didn't bother him. I stayed with him for hours, watching him. I realized I could do nothing so I went down, panic-stricken that my servants might have heard the noise. But it seems they hadn't so I told them to take a vacation for a week. I stayed with them until they left like a murderer, fearful lest someone find the body of his victim. Then I rushed back, to the room upstairs.

"But Lambert was standing just as I had left him. The bell down-stairs rang several times but I ignored it. Later I tried to get him to lie down, but I told you what happened. He wouldn't budge. I haven't been able to sleep since. I thought you could help me—advise me, so I phoned you."

The poor fellow put his face in his hands, and I heard his shuddering sigh.

"The first thing to do is phone his office, as soon as it's nine o'clock and say that you're his doctor; that he is staying with you for a few days, and that there's nothing to worry about. Then call up his valet, or some servant at his home, and say the same thing except that Mr. Lambert does not wish his whereabouts known, and all who inquire are to be told that he is out of town. Meanwhile, keep your shirt on, and let's go up and look at him."

I had to lift George out of his chair before I could get him to go up again. As we stood in the corridor, outside of the laboratory he turned to me again, but I motioned for him to open the door. He took a key-ring out of his pocket, fumblingly found the right key, and soon swung the door open. I stepped in first.

It was brighter in the laboratory than I had expected, for the sun was beginning to rise. I could see a man standing in front of a window, his back toward me. He was staring steadily out into the open, his chin tilted slightly upward, as if he were looking over the tops of the big apartment buildings beyond the park which faced George's house. We made our way past the slate topped tables, bearing racks of assorted bottles, retorts, jars, and tubes, some empty, others filled with chemicals; and finally I stood at Lambert's side, the shattered X-ray machine on the floor behind him.

At first he looked lifeless, but I soon detected that his chest rose and fell slightly as he breathed, that his cheeks looked warm with the color of life, and that his eyes were wide-open and reflected the light flooding the world outside. I called his name. He did not answer.

"Speak to me!" I commanded. He stood as one deaf.

I moved nearer to him and took his arm. I felt the muscle and bone, warm and living, but he ignored me. I started to move in front of him, but the arm I had just touched swung out and threw me aside as inexorably as a tank moving through underbrush.

As I turned around in astonishment, I found George watching me with hopeless, anxious eyes. I took him by the arm, and led him to a stool at one of the tables. I made him sit down, and drew up another stool for myself.

"Lie down on the table, and go to sleep," I said. "I'll sit here and watch." He was about to protest, but I went on. "As soon as I think out a plan, I'll wake you up."

In a few moments, the poor fellow was fast asleep. I sat silently watching Lambert, who stood as impassive as ever before the window. The noises of the awakened city came into the room—the rattling of wheels, the annoyed squawkings of auto horns, voices of people walking by, the rat-tat-tatting of riveters on some building out of sight, and the shrill whistle of a traffic-cop somewhere in the vicinity.

In all my years as a newspaperman, I had never known of a situation such as this. I tried to draw on the memories of my experiences and reading for some plan of action for Anthony, but it was useless. There was nothing to do but wait until Lambert came out of his trance, or collapsed. I knew he could not stand that way forever, so I sat and waited. Besides, my curiosity demanded that I be present to see what happened. The explanation, if there ever was one, would make an interesting story for my paper—an exclusive story, at that.

I looked at my watch. It was ten minutes after nine. I hurried downstairs to George's office, phoned Lambert's office, and then his home. At both places they listened to my story without comment, as if they were accustomed to such absences of Lambert's. Then I returned to the

laboratory, where George still slept, and Lambert stood just as I had left him.

I remembered the buorlitite, and walked up to the wrecked machine. After a minute's search, I found a piece of metallic ore, veined with red streaks, and covered with a soot, which came off on my fingers. The soot and the recollection of the greenish flash convinced me that it was the buorlitite.

I RETURNED to my stool, and sat examining the ore. There was no question that it had been subjected to great heat, as little crevices in its surface showed that it had almost burst open. The rough surface of these cracks contrasted with the smoothness of the remaining surface worn shiny by centuries of burial in the shifting soil of the glacier regions was sufficient testimony to the fact that it was a recent and terrific heat that generated the gases within the ore which burst through its polished surface. I knew enough about science to understand that.

I continued examining the buorlitite, wondering about its origin, and its flight to the earth. I sat thus idly as the hours wore on, and George continued to sleep. Suddenly, I looked at Lambert.

He had been standing upright, staring out the window. Now he had slumped against the wall, beside the window, one hand clutching the sill to keep from falling. His head sagged, resting against the window frame. I shook George. He awoke with a frightened start.

"Look," I said, and pointed toward Lambert, who was beginning to sway. George rushed past me, and caught him just as he was about to fall. With mutual understanding, we carried Lambert into George's bedroom and laid him on the bed. His eyes were shut and he was already fast asleep. George felt his pulse again, and listening to his breathing, turned to me with the first smile he had shown since he called me.

"It's all right, now," he said, his voice stronger. "He'll sleep for hours. God, I'm glad he came back."

"O.K., George," I said. "I'll rush down to the office. If he wakes before I get back, call me there, will you?" I didn't want to lose the story, and Lambert surely should have one to tell on waking.

"Oh, he won't wake before morning at the earliest," he said. "You be here early tomorrow. I'll hold him, and won't let him talk until you come. I know what you're after."

He was himself again, so I winked at him, and left.

CHAPTER II

Lambert's Vision

WHEN I reached his house the next morning, the men were already awake and at breakfast.

"Hello," said George, as he met me at the door, "Lambert's none the worse for his experience. We've been waiting for you. I sent over to the hotel for a meal. You'll join us, won't you?"

Having eaten already I declined, but was delighted to see how alive and gay George had become; how different he was from the harassed, half-crazy individual who had greeted me the day before. He took me into his dining room, and presented me to Lambert, who greeted me cheerfully.

The man looked as fresh as if he had just come from the bath. His cheeks were glowing and healthy. His eyes clear. And instead of the impassive, unseeing look that I had seen on his face, as he stood at the window, his whole expression was one of keenness and vitality.

"George tells me," he said after I was seated, "that you were here yesterday. I guess I was a gruesome—well, at any rate, a disturbing spectacle. In fact, I'm rather surprised myself, and alarmed at what I was doing while I stood there. But it was interesting while it lasted." He chuckled as he finished, and George and I smiled at each other. Lambert continued.

"George asked me not to tell him what happened to me, or what I think I was doing, until you came. He told me you were a newspaper man and quite interested in what I might have to say." I nodded in agreement and he went on. Except for stopping to light a cigarette from time to time, he told the story practically as follows:

"George posed me in front of that machine of his, and I was standing there looking out the window, thinking how pleasant it would be not to go to the office. Instead, it had suddenly occurred to me how delightful a trip around the world would be, a leisurely trip during which I could stop at all the strange little places that struck my fancy, and stay as long as I wished. Then I heard George walking slowly toward me.

"The next moment I felt something whizzing at me, and there was a crash. A flash of green flame, that did not burn me, struck my eyes, and I felt a powerful gust, like a blast of heated air. I was knocked down. How long I lay prostrate, I don't remember but I know I got to my feet somehow, and found I was perfectly blind. I couldn't see a thing.

"There was a sort of heavy black mist billowing in front of my eyes, a mist too thick to see through. Gradually, it got thinner like a vapor, and I saw that I was standing in front of a window. I could make out the window sash, the dull reflection of light on the pane, and vague outlines of buildings somewhere in the distance.

"As I stood trying to accustom my eyes to the vision,—I could feel my eyes squinting—a kaleidoscope of whirling red, and blue, and yellow lights flashed out of space into my face with a speed that made my head spin. Just as suddenly as it came, it began to recede.

"I was conscious now of a greenish flare that was thrusting the whirling lights back, away from me, and changing their colors, until it seemed as if every possible combination of color were streaming in a writhing mass before me. And then, after it receded miles into space, I saw clearly for the first time. But everything was changed.

"I felt a sense of elevation as if I had risen thousands of feet up into the air. I was conscious of a change in the atmosphere. I had

none of the solid feeling of being a mass of flesh and blood and bone that I have now, but instead I felt somehow, lighter, almost thinner,—ethereal."

His voice was so sincere that neither George nor I smiled at this description of the powerful human being who had thrust us so easily aside when we threatened interference with his vision.

"I remember thinking at that moment," he went on, "how curious it was that I should have the sense of being in the room where I was and at the same time feel myself to be thousands of feet above the city, in a rarefied atmosphere, where winds that I could not hear kept rushing by me, brushing past my eyes, yet not touching me. And believe it or not, the earth was moving toward me!

"The earth was moving toward me—that was the idea that struck me at the moment. All at once I saw the sky, but how changed it was. It should have been a thin blue, but it was a bright purple. Clouds swam past me—clouds that I knew were white, or grey fleeces of heavenly sheep, moved past me like waves of a livid green ocean. But most startling of all was the sun almost at my back—not a golden globe, nor copper colored, nor even the red sun of Indian summer. It was a flat brown disk, glistening through the purple and green of the sky and clouds.

"I couldn't bear the sight, so to steady myself I looked down. It was then that I was able to verify my sense of having risen into the air, although at no time do I think for a moment that I moved even an inch off the floor. I also discovered the certainty that the earth was moving toward me,—because there, below me, moving slowly as a heavy mill-wheel grinding corn was the city—and what a different city.

"REMEMBER it was broad daylight, when I stood before the X-ray machine. Everything should have been clear in the light of the sun, but I was looking through a mauve haze at a city of canyons as if some giant hand had clawed deep scratches into the earth. The canyon walls were skyscrapers, huge apartment buildings, and smaller houses—that were bright and colorful as children's toy houses through the haze that covered the city. Some of the buildings were a bright orange, others a brilliant yellow, glistening blue, shiny carmine, glittering black—a dazzling brightness of colors such as I had never seen the grey, and brick red, and weather-dulled houses assume before.

"The park outside had grown smaller—and its grassy lawns were flaming red. I could make out the automobiles twisting their way through the park. They were all strangely discolored. Cars that should have had shiny nickel radiators and hoods were a dirty brown in front; their fenders gleamed like frost on a window pane; and their radiant bodies seemed to have been colored by a maniac rioting in a paint shop.

"I was too far away to make out the faces of people, but those who walked were queerly clothed. One expects bright colors in the dresses, hats, shoes and stockings of women; but to see men dressed in the glittering raiment of birds of paradise was startling to say the least. Not a single man wore the sober grey, or normal blue or brown suit. Their clothes were just splotches of bright color twinkling through the haze on trousered legs.

"The women wore colorful clothes as usual, but as I said before, the earth turning toward me, together with the fact that they were walking, took them past my sense of vision before I could examine their attire more closely.

"The phenomenal thing is that they did not pass out of my vision as do people whom you watch from the side of a hill, or from the twentieth floor of a skyscraper,—but that they disappeared right under my eyes as if they had walked under my straddled legs, and had vanished behind me.

"Then the topography beneath me began to change. The edge of the city passed under my sight. A new patch of color told me I was viewing a small outlying city. Finally, rolling meadows of flaming grass, studded with clumps of aquamarine shrubbery came into my view. Fields rose up, and wrinkled into billowing grey hills, where forests looked like patches of wool, or fleeces stretched out to dry in the sun. I knew they were hills and mountains that I saw then,—always through a haze that varied between mauve and pink,—because it seemed that they approached the level of my eyes and made it unnecessary for me to look down."

I recalled the peculiar uptilt of his chin as I had seen him staring out of the window.

"Occasionally, a winding orange ribbon, that glistened wetly in the light, would float by, with what I made out to be brilliantly colored ships and boats. Across the hills and countryside stretched gleaming blue roads, specked with crawling brightly colored ants that I knew were automobiles, that led into the gay clusters that were cities. One of these clusters, larger than the rest, reached many gray chimneys toward the sky, from which billowed clouds that were bright and green as grass, that sent shimmering heat waves up toward my eyes. I remember that city because of the green veil that seemed to hover over it.

"All these things passed under me, as the earth turned toward me. Then I had a peculiar experience. A bird was flying toward me in an unwavering straight line. Its wings never moved. I was wondering what terrific power its motionless wings must possess to propel it at such a terrific swoop across the earth, when I detected two sets of glistening blue wings fastened to the body of this bird. It was an airplane. As it came closer I could make out the features of the pilot behind the purplish windshield.

"It loomed larger and larger before my eyes. I had a sudden fear that it would crash into my face. I wanted to cry out, to duck my head, but I was powerless to move. I saw the vicious whirling of its glittering brown propeller. It came closer and closer. It was about to cut right through me, when it passed me by *without a sound*—passed right through me, without so much as a whisper.

"But I had noticed a remarkable thing. I had seen the pilot's eyes through his goggles as the plane approached. You've noticed the expres-

sion of a man driving an auto, when someone inadvertently crosses his path. He is either furious, or frightened. But this pilot's face was calm, and his eyes stared straight ahead, empty of any emotion. Even though I was right in front of his plane, terrified lest he cut me down, *he did not see me.*

"That reminds me of his face. It was hideous. His cheeks were a livid, mouldy green. And his lips were a ghastly blue gash in his face. I would have thought him a phantom, except that through the cabin windows of the passenger plane, for that's what it was, I could see the faces of other men and women, all with ghastly green faces; the women with brighter, greener spots, where they had roughed their cheeks, and with deeper bluish smudges for lips.

"I refuse to believe that it was a ghost of a pilot transporting ghosts as passengers, because everything I saw up to this point and after, except for my distorted sense of color, gave me the feeling of reality.

"DESPITE the fact that the pilot and none of his passengers made the slightest sign of recognition as the plane passed under my eyes, the earth continued turning toward me as before. This time I saw a long, wide river, wider than any I had seen so far. It was a dull brown in color, with a great side-wheeled boat moving down from my right side toward my left. The boat was black in color. But beyond it were brightly colored barges, and tugs drawing long rafts, many of them piled high with gleaming sacks, mounds that glittered like diamonds, and other stuffs of varying colors and forms. Beyond the river, surrounding the bright cities, stretched a great carmine prairie.

"I watched the plains as they rolled beneath me. Here and there I could see herds of horned animals, their heads bent to the ground as they cropped the red grass. I knew they were cattle, but their coloring was like the patches of a crazy quilt. Far above them, a flock of great birds with flapping wings flew into view, forming amazing geometric color patterns. Again I was gripped by fear as the wedge of flying birds, their wings fluttering almost in my face, passed under the line of my vision.

"Farther on I saw several other planes flying. One attracted my attention as it circled in the air above a patch of red lawn where a gaily bedecked crowd was gathered before a huge white shed. As I watched the plane, I saw something fall like a hawk swooping on its prey. Suddenly, a great black flower blossomed out of this object, spread out into the shape of a mushroom—and began to sway and flutter in the air as the wind caught it. It was a parachute and I could see the calmness of the man it supported, as his body turned, dipped, and fell.

"The ground began to swell into hills, like red carpets heaped carelessly into great piles. Great yellow patches, that moved restlessly, like water beginning to simmer in a pot, appeared on the surface. As they came nearer I made out thousands of sheep and in the distance, gradually approaching me, I saw the huge forests; great splotches of light coloring, chiefly white, that seemed daubed by the brush of some superhuman artist.

"The splotches faded into a mahogany darkness, that glistened as the hills drew nearer, and took shape into huge peaks towering into the purple sky. The black peaks had a smoothness of surface strangely different from the texture of the hills. They grew blacker, and shone more wetly as they drew nearer. Then, they rose towering above my head, coming closer and closer, in a solid heavy mass.

"Again, I felt the strange fear of collision. I wanted to back away, to run from the mountains toppling over on my head. I struggled to shut my eyes as a jagged peak loomed dangerously nearer. Fascinated beyond my will, I watched it rolling over on my head.

"I don't know how it happened, but I suddenly felt my head turn ever so slightly to the left, and an axe-head of purple sky seemed to cleave a wedge between the glistening mountain peaks, that rolled past under me,—and before me, up to the half-circle of the horizon, stretched a great expanse of glittering grey. As far as I could see, there was nothing but this slumbering ocean that, coming closer, revealed little black flashes, that became tossing waves.

CHAPTER III

As the Earth Turned

"I WAS again conscious of the feeling of things passing under me as the ocean turned nearer toward me. Suddenly, in the corner of my eye, I saw a pink cloud swirling down toward the ocean. A black wave leaped up to meet it. Other waves followed, churning the sea into a grey rage. The whirling of waves and cloud began to take more definite shape, and soon, a twisting column of water extended from the ocean to the sky, thinning out in the middle, and thickening like an hour glass into wedges at either end.

"As the scene came closer to me, the writhing column moved across the sea. That particular place deepened in color as if the sky were darkening. Then, I saw a four funnelled ship that had crept into the line of my vision. Tiny figures scurried across the desk; some to life-boats, swinging at the side of the ship. One life boat and then another dropped over the side, and tossed on the waves, moving desperately under the swaying of the rowing figures. With a sudden rush the water-spout swarmed about the ship, uptilted its nose, and angrily hurled the body of the ship. Twisting helplessly in its clutches, up toward the sky. Then the spout dropped, hung motionless for an instant and disappeared, engulfed in the waves that poured over it, and swept on after the life-boats, under my range of vision.

"For a time after that I was conscious of nothing before me.

"Then, I felt a dazzling glare, as if a mirror, reflecting the rays of the sun, was being focussed on my eyes. Gradually, I penetrated the glittering rays, and beheld a shimmering expanse of

land, that sparkled up at me. It had the texture and appearance of a tremendous piece of fawn-colored silk that had been stretched across the country. Here and there a red flower blossomed on a thin blue stalk, that became, as it rolled nearer, a palm tree.

"Once a caravan moved slowly across the silken land. The camels were grotesquely pale skinned, almost as if naked human beings transformed into the shapes of camels, were crawling on hands and knees across the desert. On their backs were black clad figures, in mantles and cowls, revealing strangely pallid faces.

"In time, the desert passed and a huge lustrous area cut through with streaks of cobalt resolved itself into an extensive city. For a while sparks from the tops of this city disturbed me, flashing into my eyes. Then I could see that they were the circular, brown-sheened tops of buildings with pointed short spires, like spikes atop helmets. Then I witnessed another change in the land beneath me. Stretching as far as my eyes could see was an expanse of luscious red vegetation.

"I was conscious of no uncomfortable sensation in my eyes, such as anyone would expect from staring intently at a brilliant red light. As sections of the scene rolled upward and ever closer to me, I saw a queer procession through the red jungle. Along an almost imperceptible path (for so densely was it hidden by sweeping leafy branches, and twining rope-like creepers) crept a straggling line of white figures, naked except for strings about their hips, carrying varicolored packs upon their heads and strapped across their backs and shoulders. They made their way laboriously into the jungle, and disappeared.

"Later in a clearing, I saw a little hut swaying. Straining my eyes, I discerned a howdah on the withers of a blue elephant, whose head swung restlessly, while its blue ears flapped. Suddenly, the tall grass in front of the elephant began to sway in sudden spurts. Beyond, naked figures, such as those in the earlier procession, thrashed the luminous foliage with spears. Scores of them were steadily making their way in a closing ring toward the elephant and the howdah. The spurts in the grass also came closer.

"SUDDENLY, a huge brown cat with white slashes across its body sprang in a desperate leap at the elephant who backed away, its trunk writhing like a blue snake. From the howdah, came a spurt of green flame, a burst of grey smoke, and the brown and white beast, its leap arrested in midair, plunged headlong to the ground and fell clawing at the feet of the elephant, that lifted one ponderous foot and crushed it.

"After a time, the vegetation thinned and became more solid red. Then, a straggly grey carpet appeared that took on the restless appearance of the ocean I had seen before.

"Once a great blue torpedo moved slowly across the sky, and metamorphosed into a great Zeppelin with tiny cabins, dark against the rounded belly of the giant air-ship. As it came closer, I could see the ghastly livid greenish faces, shining in the darkness of the cabins that convinced me of electric lights burning within.

"The greyness of the revolving ocean grew tiresome, and I turned to the right so that I would be facing North.

"After a time, the greyness vanished into a sleek black surface that was land but a land totally devoid of the reddish coloration of the country I had seen until now. Beyond the broken outlines of the dark country that passed now, were further patches of greyish sea. Until these moments, I had been looking toward the earth through a mauve haze. Now, it changed and deepened almost to normal twilight. As I watched the sleek black surface pass, streaks of brilliant blackness shot up out of the earth. I followed their direction, and found that the purplish sky had lightened till it seemed I was looking at the sun through an emerald, such a bright green had the sky become.

"As I watched this phenomenon, I became aware of some force that was trying to drag my line of vision down from the sky and back to the darkness of the earth. I could see the line of vision my eyes followed. Actually, it seemed that green rays reached out from my eyes into the greenish sky, because I could see the ends of the green rays waver and bend toward the earth, and strain back in a curve toward the sky.

"I am not certain that any power of mine held them in the sky. All I know is that I felt this downward pull, and watched helplessly and resentfully at this tugging at the distant end of my line of vision.

"Just as it seemed that I would have to look at the earth again, something black, from beyond the extreme rim of the earth, flashed upward into the sky, across the green rays bending earthward, and catching them, tore them irresistibly from the downward pull that I had noticed.

"Then I became aware, slowly at first, as my eyes followed the black fragment, hurtling through space like a stone thrown into the air, of other dark fragments, flashing dully through the sky. They twisted, and whirled, and sped about the fragment that had freed the green ray, and was now dragging it through the atmosphere. The end of the ray flickered loose for an instant and then snapped back to the meteor it followed. The flickering became more and more apparent, as other meteoric fragments flew nearer. At last, a fragment larger than the one to which the ray was attached, smashed across its path, and carried off the ray.

"The speed of the meteors was dazzling. My eyes darting across the sky followed the increasing rapidity with which the end of the ray was torn first from one fragment and then another, by other flashing meteors that flew across the path of the green ray.

"Finally, I noticed a subtle change of color each time one of these liberations and captures of the ray was affected by the flying meteors. First, in tiny sparks, and then in bursts of color, and eventually, explosions of brilliant flaming gases, that went spinning through the emerald sky behind the black meteors.

"These flaming gases collided and became

whirling pin-wheels of color, darting toward me along the path of the green ray. They merged and grew larger. Their speed increased, until suddenly a gyrating kaleidoscope of blazing colors, that had started as a speck, hurled itself at me along the green ray.

"Just as its size had increased until it entirely obliterated the green sky, its whirling stopped. It stood still for an instant, a mass of writhing rainbows, suspended for a terrifying moment during which I realized the fear of complete annihilation by the colorful danger. Then it disappeared in a rush of merciful blackness that flew into my face, and completely enveloped me. . . .

"The next thing I knew I had opened my eyes in George's bed, and found him watching me with a worried expression. He asked me how I felt. When I reassured him that I felt fine, but was quite puzzled at my experience, he told me that I had been standing in front of that window for a day and a half, staring into space, but that I was to tell him nothing of my experiences until after I had eaten and you had arrived. Now you know it all."

WHEN he finished speaking, Lambert settled back in his chair with a smile, and calmly puffed at his cigarette. For a moment I looked at George expecting to see my incredulity reflected on his face, but his face was void of expression. I felt a sudden surge of anger at the suspicion that I had been hoaxed; that this story was a joke they had framed on me, knowing my eternal newspaperman's curiosity. I looked back at Lambert.

"Well, what do you think of it?" he asked, smiling at me again.

"Think of it!" I exclaimed. "Either you're still drunk, and seeing things, or you dreamt it all." He raised a protesting hand, but I continued. "Granting that you were sober, I would have believed anything you might say if you hadn't begun your story so unfortunately.

"You began by saying that, as you stood posed before the X-ray machine, you thought of how pleasant it would be to drop business and everything and just travel around the world. Then you proceed to tell us about an imaginary trip that makes you cross a couple of continents and a couple of oceans. Then you throw in something about meteors to tie up with the buorlitite. Do you expect me to believe that all these suggestions before the accident to your eyes, did not automatically control the subject matter of your dream? Of course not!"

Lambert looked at me with a hurt, bewildered expression, and turned helplessly to George. George laughed abruptly, and then turned to me and spoke.

"That's just the trouble with you newspapermen," he said. "You know a little of everything—just enough to make you draw rapid conclusions. Your knowledge of dreams is right enough as far as it goes. You discount the fact that I examined Lambert as he stood at the window and found that his pulse was not that of a man asleep but that of a man watching an exciting event. Furthermore, after his collapse, he was fast asleep, when you helped me carry him to bed."

"But he might have dreamt it then," I protested, catching at a straw.

"Yes, he might," replied George, "except for two facts. First, that men who sleep the sleep of exhaustion, such as did Lambert after being subjected to an abnormal strain for a day and a half, normally are too tired to dream. Secondly, he knew nothing of the buorlitite, because I had not had a chance to show it to him, and consequently the lack of knowledge of the existence of the buorlitite could not have suggested to his subconscious mind that he dream about it in any manner whatsoever."

"Well, then, I beg your pardon, Lambert," I said to him. He nodded graciously. I turned back to George. "But tell me, how the scientific mind that you possess would explain it."

"I don't know the answer," he said, soberly. "But this is what I believe. The way the buorlitite flew into the X-ray machine establishes an affinity between it and the X-rays. Lambert's description of the struggle of the earth in the polar regions to draw the green ray toward itself, as opposed to the attraction of the ray for the sky, when considered with the peculiar way in which meteoric fragments captured and recaptured the green ray from one another, show some evidence that there was a magnetic affinity between the green ray and the polar magnetism of the earth, as well as the magnetism of the heavenly bodies of which meteoric fragments are a part.

"Then," he continued, "there is the green flash from the explosive action of the buorlitite and the X-ray which struck Lambert's eyes and affected them so strangely. The first effect was to allow him to surmount the normal difficulties of vision by enabling him to extend the range of his sight over buildings, over mountains, and around the globe. Perhaps, the green ray which did this to Lambert has a bearing on the fourth dimension which is supposed to enable one to see much more than a three-dimensional world. I admit that everything Lambert described for us was only three-dimensional, but he may have seen many things that he could not understand and consequently forgot."

"Yes, that is an interesting explanation," I admitted. "But what about the crazy colors through which he saw the world?"

"That's easiest of all to explain," replied George, "if you've ever looked through colored-glasses. If you have, you've noticed how the particular color of the glass dominates the colors of everything, so that all colors while consistently affected are nevertheless altered from the various shades that you know them to be.

"My explanation is that the green ray may have the effect upon normal human eye-sight of colored glasses—*blending all the colors into one*—might have upon your eyes or mine.

"Of course this is only my conjecture about everything that Lambert has told us,—theories at best. But when the affinities between the buorlitite and the X-ray are established, as they undoubtedly will some some day, and the green

(*Continued on Page 427*)

When Planets Clashed

By **Manly Wade Wellman**

(*Illustrated by Marchioni*)

One man tackled me around the knees. He fought to keep me from the levers. Through my helmet I could see his distorted face. . . .

FOREWORD

MY part in repelling the attempted Martian invasion of Earth in the years 2675-77 was a limited one. As for my skill in telling of it, I again recognize my limitations. Many learned and authoritative writers have said their say about our first and only interplanetary war. I, who am no writer at all, add to their works only because of a request from men in high places, who argue that my story is a unique chapter in that conflict's history.

Like wars of earlier times, the Martian-Terrestrial hostilities had a deep foundation in misunderstanding.

Several hundred years previously radio communication was first established between the worlds and, shortly afterward, intrepid Martian scientists reached Earth in a pioneer space-ship.

They were welcomed with both hospitality and suspicion. Much was said to their faces of brotherhood and good-will across the emptiness of space; much more behind their backs of preparation against possibly dangerous visitors from the only other inhabited planet in the solar system. In succeeding years, whenever the orbits of the two worlds brought them into comparative proximity, a flourishing exchange of trade goods and tourists sprang up, and potential enmity as well.

The first strain in interplanetary relations came when representatives of the World League rejected the request of the ruler of Mars for permission to establish colonies on Earth. When the Martian executive protested that his planet, with deserts where oceans once stood, was dying, he was told that Earth was rapidly approaching a similar condition and it could not engage to feed mouths from across space.

This and other differences did not help to maintain good feeling. Then one day a party of Martian tourists, riding in a sight-seeing car at St. Louis, seat of the World League's government, was surrounded by a crowd of roistering students. One wealthy Martian ordered his retainers to clear a way for the car. A fight ensued, in which the Martians were severely beaten with sticks and cudgels. Three of them died, including a man high in office on his own planet. Others sustained bad injuries.

The ruler of Mars sent a brusque demand by radio, calling the incident a proof of Earth's enmity. He asked redress for the families of the dead Martians, as well as the surrender of the Terrestrial rioters, then held in jail at St. Louis. In the meantime, he proposed to seize and hold as hostages all Terrestrials then upon his planet. In this way it was expected retaliation might be made and the determination of Mars to see this thing through be shown.

After a brief consultation, the World League's representatives empowered their president, Silas Parrish, to send an even more blunt reply. In substance it refused the demands of the Martian ruler and also accused him of seeking an excuse for war with Earth. As for the Terrestrials he held, the World League sent its police to arrest all Martians on Earth as a retaliation.

This was followed by agreement to release hostages on both planets, and the return of the captives to their own planet. I was among those deported from Mars, and with my experiences at that time I begin this account, endeavoring to make it both accurate and readable.

JACK STILLWELL

MANLY WADE WELLMAN

STORIES of interplanetary warfare usually presuppose earthlings who are all heroes and enemies across space who are all villains. The supposition is also made that the earth is fighting to defend its honor or its people from a predatory race from another world.

This psychology is not at all new. It is the favorite in our wars on earth, and the propaganda each nation put out in 1914-18 in the form of books, lectures and motion pictures showed it as a just, peaceable nation defending only its right to existence.

With the perspective of nearly fifteen years behind us, we are able to realize that seldom is any nation solely a villain and another solely a hero. Wars, we have learned, are the work of professional war makers, and are fought by men who kill those they might be friendly with, were they permitted to be. The present story is splendid for its picturization of an interplanetary war, that shows both sides of the picture.

CHAPTER I

Farewell

OF all the Terrestrials up on Mars at the beginning of hostilities, few, if any, regretted more than I the order to return to Earth.

Five years before, at the age of twenty, I had come to Mars as the youngest member of the Terrestrial Legation. My ties at home had been light, for I was an orphan, and I had gladly come to this strange planet, to lay the foundations for a career and a fortune.

I had not suffered on Mars. In the years when one progresses from youth into manhood he gets much out of life in the way of pleasures, knowledge and friends. The latter, to me, were Martians of my own age. I found them understanding, responsive, square. We talked together of the good times to come when, grown to the leadership of our worlds, we would make for yet a stronger and closer alliance. And I had met Yann.

Yann to me was more sweet, more lovely and more loveable than any woman of my own planet—Yann, dark-faced, alert, with the Martian flashing black eyes and quick understanding. When her hand first touched mine in greeting, I felt its pressure upon my heart. And would this war lose her to me?

On my last night in Ekadome, the City of Martian Rulers, I left the company of my fellow Terrestrials as they sat in groups at the rocket port and glumly discussed the impending conflict. We were hemmed about with guards, but the commanding officer of the port was my old friend. To him I made my plea, and he readily accepted my parole and sent me, with a servant, to find a closed Martian electro-car. "Back an hour before dawn," he warned me in the quick staccato Martian tongue. "When the sun rises, your ship clears."

The car whirled me through subterranean corridors to my destination. I stepped from it at last, and found a lift. The operator thought nothing of me, for, with my Martian clothes and haircut, and the deep tan of three summers in the Martian resort, Pulambar, I had little of the Terrestrial in my appearance. He complied with my request to be taken to the upper levels, although, had he known my origin, he would have raised a shout that would have brought citizens of Ekadome to mob me. I reached the open air but five steps from a dear gateway I had come to know well.

Inside was Yann's garden, roofed over with a transparent, vitreous veil to shut out the cold night air. Blossoms as large as tabletops and of wildly gorgeous colors lined the path on either hand. Beyond them I saw Yann, on a seat beneath a clump of plants like giant, many-tinted cat-tails.

I swiftly reached her side. As she offered her hand, I touched it with my lips for the first time. It quivered like a startled bird, but did not draw away. "Sit down, Chac," she invited in her delightful Martian tongue—quick and vibrant.

"I have come to say goodbye."

"Goodbyes should never be said," volunteered another voice. It was Yann's brother Nalo, who had been lounging in nearby Martian shadows. He now came forward to press my palm between both of his, Martian fashion. "Whatever our foolish worlds may do, Chac, you and I are friends."

"Friends and brothers," I replied.

"Well you may say that the worlds are foolish," said Yann as we sat down with her, one on either hand. "Every great man in our council tells the reason why we went to war, and each reason is different from all the others."

"The real cause is that we two peoples, while similar in appearances, are different in language and customs," said Nalo. "We find it too hard to speak each other's language or wear each other's clothes."

"Chac wears Martian costume, and I don't object to his accent," said Yann. "It makes him charming."

SHE smiled to me as she spoke, and for such a smile I would gladly have died.

I cannot tell you how oval was her face, nor how black her hair; how her figure was at once regal and delicate, how her every motion was grace quickened to life, how her glad spirit gave a light that illuminated my dark mood like a lamp. These things are sacred and have no place in a history of bloodshed.

"War is a childish think in any case," went on Nalo. "Somewhere in the history of your world, Chac, a war was fought against organized criminals. With that exception, I can tell you of no fighting that was ever good or wise."

"You are right," I agreed.

"However, I don't think that there will be a long conflict. It is thirty days or more between worlds. During a space-ship's flight of that duration, friendship might last, but not hate. We shall all gather and laugh at this thing before we are a great deal older."

"Nalo is right there, too," smiled Yann. "The silly trouble will soon be settled. Then, Chac, you can come back to us."

"Yes," I said, "I can come back to you."

Back to them—to her! The words in her mouth seemed so true, and were so much what I wished! I looked at her in adoration. Nalo read my heart and his white teeth flashed in a grin.

"There are guests inside," he said. "I must beg to be forgiven if I go to help my father entertain them. Chac, here is my hand between yours. May we meet again soon!"

He strode away, as true a gentleman as ever breathed the air of any planet. A door closed behind him. I turned to Yann.

"He knew that I wanted to be alone with you," I said.

"With me? Delightful!"

The tears fought to break from my eyes, for I was very young, very miserable, and very much in love.

"Yann, dearest—" I choked. "How shall I say that I must leave?"

She put out her hand as if she knew how eager I was for her touch. As I clasped it in mine and bowed above it, the fingers of her other hand rested lightly on my hair. So we stood silently for a second; then our arms went around each other and for a blessedly aching space we kissed. Her eyes flickered shut in ecstasy, then opened and looked into mine. "Sit down, Chac," she said.

I did so. She dropped onto the seat beside me, fondling my hand.

"We love each other," she said, "and now we must be worlds apart. But, my dear, let us be brave for each other's sake."

I nodded silently.

"You are returning to your earth. As a young

man, you will be ordered to do your part in fighting my people."

"Never! Never!" I cried passionately. "I will go to prison before I make war on you and yours."

"No, Chac," she said. "That is not the way to think. You are a Terrestrial, beloved, and you must be true to your birthright. Do your duty as it is required of you. Work or fight, as you are bidden. Whatever you do, do it well and honestly. And, oh, Chac, try to avoid danger? Live through whatever befalls you, and come back when the war is over!"

I kissed her trembling mouth again and, holding her close, vowed that I would return to claim her if I lived. At last, when time came for me to return to the rocket port, I carried my head high and stifled the pain within me, for I gloried in the new-found love that Yann bore me.

The World Under Arms

WE deported Terrestrials left Mars on the morning of January 2, 2675. On February 8—in those days the interplanetary passage took a month or longer—our ships slid into the atmosphere of Earth and settled onto the landing stages of the New Orleans rocket port,

We emerged from the hatchways to be surrounded by port attendants and officers, eager to talk to us about Mars as we had last seen it. Was the Martian morale good? Was the preparation for warfare far advanced? Had we suffered indignities? And a thousand other queries.

In turn they gave us the latest news. Although our ships had been unmolested by the enemy (for such I knew I must thenceforth consider the Martians), several skirmishes had flared up between opposing patrols in space. One young officer, a red-faced lieutenant who was very vain of his expensive new uniform, told me that only two days before he had helped beat back a combat group from Mars which had ventured to within a half million miles of Earth.

"They're going to be harder to whip than the news dispatches say," he told me. "However, we did plenty with our new ray-guns. If you've been away for five years, you can't have heard much about the disintegrator ray. Want to have a look?"

He took me to a long, rakish war craft that rested on a stage near by and in the gun room pointed out a complex system of levers and coils.

"Here is the target finder," he said. "Television, of course. With it you can locate and aim at a range of a thousand miles or more, though the ray itself won't be effective so far away. On the space-dreadnoughts there are long-range poppers that can do the business at many times that distance."

He fiddled with the mechanism. "Once you spot the target, you put the 'finger' on it— the ray, that is, just like turning a searchlight on some object—and press this lever. Whatever is at the other end will disintegrate on the moment. It's all more complicated than I can explain, full of atomic explosion formulas and the like."

"Did you get many Martians in the fight?" I asked.

"We washed out a dozen or so. I finished two myself, with this very ray-gun. So." He turned on the power. The finder showed us a distorted view of tall buildings.

"That's right here in town. Suppose we were attacking Shreveport." He spun a dial rapidly. A new skyline rose into view. "Now, if the ray was working, and I cared to, I could knock off that tallest building 'way up the Mississippi, as easily as I did those red and white Martian ships day before yesterday. Snip! Like that!"

"Red and white Martian ships?" I repeated. "That would be the Young Defenders. They're a junior sky corps, Martians about our age or a bit under. I know some of the officers. They're very decent fellows."

The lieutenant looked at me queerly. "That's a bad way to talk, now that we're at war," he said. "Martians are more appealing as targets than as house guests, just now."

"Rot!" said I, nettled. "You'd be glad to know such chaps at any other time. Can't we be sane about this scrap?"

He studied me with narrowed eyes as we left the ship. "I'm not at all sure," he said in parting, "that I should have told you so much about the ray-gun."

He was too clumsy in his suggestion that I was a Martian sympathizer. Had he been less so, my temper might have gone. As it was, I laughed and walked away, but the discourse left a bad taste in my mouth which lasted all the way to St. Louis.

There I went at once to the office of James Stillwell, staff member with the Intelligence Department of the Terrestrial Army. This man, my uncle and only living relative, was also my closest friend on Earth.

His duties were many, but he turned from them in a second to give me a warm welcome. "You are home safe and happy!" he cried, forcing me into a seat.

"Not so happy, uncle," I told him.

"That girl on Mars, eh?" I held few secrets from him. "Well, Jack, I hope that you won't distress yourself too much about her. This is going to be a true war, my boy, and there will be enough blood spilled to wet the way clear to Mars and back again before you will be able to see her. Are you going into the service?"

"That's why I'm here."

"Good boy! And what branch do you want to enter?"

"I haven't any choice."

"Then you need go no further than the Intelligence. You're young, smart, and just back from a long stay on Mars. Men like you are invaluable. We'll have you in a uniform this very day. What is your reserve rating? Captain, I think? Right? Well, come along."

I did so, glad for his wholesome cordiality. Yet my determination to do my utmost was fostered, not by anything that he said, but by the words of Yann, who had urged me to work or fight my best, even against her people.

CHAPTER II

Raiders from Space

WE of Earth began the war in excellent spirits. We were mightier in numbers, richer in all resources save metals, than the Martians. They had the better of us in volume of fighting materials—space-ships, ammunition, the thousand things that armed forces must have—but we did not expect them to be ready for a decisive attack upon us for quite awhile. In the meantime the planets were swinging apart and two years and more would pass before they drew close again. Ample time for us to gather and equip forces for our defense.

The new disintegrator ray-gun, the same weapon that was explained to me on the day that I returned from Mars, was one of our chief hopes. It was rightly believed to be far superior to the roving bomb, which was directed and exploded by radio controls and which, as a deadly weapon in aerial warfare, had often been used in the past by both Terrestrial and Martian nations. The ray-guns were being manufactured in quantity even as I came back, while thousands of young volunteers were learning their use and mechanism.

That the Martian agents would attempt to carry news and working plans of this device to their people was, perhaps, the chief fear of our High Command in those days. The Intelligence Department and its attendant throngs of operatives kept constant watch upon factories, broadcasting stations and other points. Every message put on the wires or the air was rigidly censored. As an intelligence officer, therefore, I found plenty to do to keep from brooding on what I had left behind me on Mars.

On April 1, 2675, war came in earnest, as dreadful as it was unexpected.

So suddenly were the raiders upon us that we knew it not. They struck Earth effectively in three places. Steel mills in Labrador, built to accommodate the large quantities of ore mined in the Republic of Greenland, were blown to bits in the night by roving bombs, while the attackers fled without being seen. In the same hour, at Flagstaff, Arizona, the observatory and the interplanetary broadcasting station located there were demolished by a flight of Martian space-ships which were sighted but escaped unharmed. As noon of April 1 approached and sunset came to the other side of Earth, barracks at Algiers were smitten and two thousand newly-recruited soldiers killed like so many ants.

Vengeful swarms of Terrestrial ships sped into space, searching here and there, but to no avail. The Martians, their errand done, showed the cleanest heels in history, while the pursuers were forced to return for want of a trail in the trackless sky.

But return did not bring rest. Two nights later the Martians were back again. They neatly knocked a row of meteorological laboratories from the tops of the Rocky Mountains, as boys knock birds from a branch with stones. Factories and warehouses at Rio de Janeiro were smashed to rubbish. At Nashville the raiders swooped down, but found a hot reception. Ray-gun defenses disposed of five and sent the others away, their errand of destruction brought to nothing.

In the morning this last incident was being celebrated as a victory by short-sighted folks, but those with whom the combat rested were really worried, the Intelligence Department most of all.

It chanced that I was in the office of my uncle when two of his fellow staff-members, Clyde Atrim and Gundell Goldansky, burst in. I rose, saluted, and started to go, but Atrim waved me to a seat.

"You may as well hear us, Captain Stillwell," he said. "It's a pity that all the department isn't here."

He seated himself across the desk from my uncle. "Because we put the finger on those five feeble Martians at Nashville, Earth must consider the war half won!" he exploded. "It was no credit to us that they were washed out. They foolishly exposed themselves, and, had they escaped, they would have been sure to draw reprimands!"

"The said thing is," continued his companion, "that they'll be back again, tonight or tomorrow night or the next, at some other point. Every raid cripples us worse. They're wrecking our factories, killing our fighting men, right and left. We'll have to put a stop to them, or Earth will be whipped to a standstill inside of three months."

"It stands to reason," argued Atrim, "that there aren't a great many of them, or they wouldn't hit and run. They'd stay and make a battle of it with our patrols. I'm willing to wager that the raiding parties are the same in each case, a small group of fast space-ships. They can dash out from hiding, strike at a previously designated spot, and dash back again."

"Where is their base then?" asked Goldansky. "They certainly aren't flying to and fro from Mars every night."

"Hardly," said my uncle. "The interplanetary passage must be more than a hundred and twenty million miles just now. That would take a tremendous ship, and the journey would last three months or more."

"Then they must be on Earth somewhere," said Goldansky.

BUT, though thousands of air-scouts patrolled the entire surface of the globe next day and investigations were ordered in every community of every nation, nothing was learned. But, on the second night following the conference in my uncle's office, the raiders struck once more, bombing government granaries in Siberia.

Early next morning, as my uncle and I ruefully discussed the radio reports of the attack, Goldansky and Atrim, the latter carrying a suitcase, again burst into the office.

"We've spotted them!" cried Goldansky excitedly.

"Who?" asked my uncle.

"Why, the Martians," said Atrim. "Look here!"

He opened the suitcase and dragged out a rumpled mass of metal-braced fabric, shaped roughly like a coverall garment.

"They shot down one of the space-ships in Siberia last night," he explained, "and, luckily, it wasn't all disintegrated. Its equipment, which officers thought worthy of examination, was rushed here this morning. This was part of it."

My uncle considered the thing carefully, then raised questioning eyes. "But it's only a space-suit, a standard piece of equipment in the lockers of any interplanetary ship."

"Only a space-suit, eh?" snapped Goldansky, almost belligerent in his earnestness. "Look at the thing's shoes!"

He pointed to them. "They're worn and scratched, even if their soles are thicker and stronger than ordinary. Now, these suits are designed to allow repair work on the outside of ships while in space. Isn't that right?"

"That's right," said my uncle.

"But this one has done far more than that. Its owner has walked on soil and rocks!"

Again we examined the shoes and saw that what Goldansky said was true.

"And then?" prompted my uncle.

"The rest is obvious. Why wear the thing while walking on the ground. The answer is that there is no atmosphere above the ground. And where is there such a place?"

My uncle gave a shout as understanding burst upon him.

"Why, they're on the moon!"

And I saw how possible it was. In those days we paid little or no attention to Earth's dead child, hanging in the near heavens without air or water. Adventurers, scientists and cranks had made some small exploration, but there it ended. One of the few true benefits of the war was that we came to learn what great mineral treasures our satellite held, and today citizens, mines and factories again bring life to its dead face.

But the Martians, I knew, had not so rich and pleasant a world as ours. Long ago, pressed for expansion room, they had reached and settled their own two tiny moons, breathing artificial air in cities that were covered with mighty domes. What more natural than that they should see the possibility of similar use of our moon? The few hundred thousand miles to the earth could be traversed readily and quickly by fleets of small raiders, which could rain down destruction and escape to their hiding again.

"Let's urge a punitive expedition at once," said my uncle.

"Not so fast," said Atrim. "We'll have to find their base first. Probably it is a small one, and the moon is large. The only thing of which we can be reasonably sure just now is that they are on the far side. The side toward us—always the same side, of course—would be too easily examined by telescope for their comfort."

"Better say nothing about this matter just now," said my uncle. "The Martian spies—and the city is full of them—musn't guess that we know. Jack, do you mind leaving us while we discuss this affair? What you have heard is, I know, safe with you."

I rose, but Goldansky held up his hand.

"Let the captain stay. I think, in fact, that he should know everything we say."

"Why so?" asked Atrim.

"Because my suggestion is to send a single scout to find the headquarters of the Martians. He can be swift and unobtrusive. They would be aware of a large force, but one man could find them and come away unseen—the more because they wouldn't be looking for him."

"I agree with you," said my uncle.

"I agree also, and see your point in keeping Stillwell's nephew here," added Atrim. "What man could be a better scout than he, with his knowledge of Martian affairs?"

"Do you mean for me to be a spy, sir?" I asked Goldansky.

"Not exactly. Just to find out all you can about the place, if it exists at all."

"It would be a glorious adventure," said Atrim.

"And a dangerous one," supplemented Goldansky.

"I hope that you don't think my nephew will balk at danger," put in my uncle.

"Not in the least, but he should understand all the risks of the enterprise."

"I'd gladly go, sir," I said. "I'm flattered that you think me worthy."

"Good man!" said Atrim, offering his hand.

A Dangerous Mission

THE greater part of the morning was spent in preparing for my dash. The moon, as Earth saw it, was new, and therefore would be nearly full as observed from the far side. I studied exhaustively lunar maps and photographs and made copious notes. The space-ship which was selected for my use was a one-man observation craft. It was long, narrow and sharp-bowed, almost needle-like in proportion, with barely enough cabin- room to accommodate one man, lying at full-length. Although it had no armament of any kind, its television and radio equipment was of the highest order and it was designed to achieve and hold tremendous speed.

Before entering I donned a space-suit, all save the airtight metal helmet, which I placed in the cabin's locker. This suit was of Martian make which, as it later turned out, was a piece of good fortune. In its pockets I put an automatic pistol, loaded with fifty shells. At a few minutes before noon I was ready to depart.

"Goodbye, captain!" said Goldansky, wringing my gloved hand.

"Take care of yourself!" this from Atrim.

"God bless you, my boy," was my uncle's farewell.

I stepped into the padded interior which, as the ship was raised on its stern like an obelisk, held me upright. The panel closed, shutting out the three friendly faces. Before my eyes was the television apparatus, already set upon the disc of the moon. I touched the starter and, as my ship rose lightly from its moorings, shifted my fingers to the accelerator. Away I whipped, up, up into the blue, until I was past Earth's atmospheric envelope. Once in space, I increased to full speed and turned my eyes to where, on the screen, the moon bulked larger and larger with the passing minutes.

My craft seemed to hang motionless upon noth-

ing. A glance out of the ports showed the starry black of space. Below my feet was the silvery full disc of Earth. Only the figures on my speed dials showed the breath-taking clip at which I was travelling; only the ticking of instruments and the rustle of my own movements broke the utter silence of my flight.

Some three hours after my journey began, with the face of the moon nearly filling my forward port, I cut down my speed. At a reduced pace I swung around the satellite's brightest edge. Its lightest portion changed from the shape of a sickle to that of a crescent, that grew and grew until, drawing close to it, I found myself sliding along a few miles above a bleak, mountainous region.

The topmost peaks, I knew, were far higher than any on Earth. Swiftly crossing them, I next skimmed along above a plain, hundreds of miles in extent. In one or two places there seemed to be straight furrows or ditches, full of shadows, that bore some resemblance to the smaller canals of Mars. My thoughts, going back to the waterways of that far planet, conjured up a vision of their own volition.

Once more I seemed to see Yann's lovely face, clouded around with dark hair, while she bade me do my part in the war. Could she have forseen my present task, would she still have counselled me so? I sighed, all alone in my hurrying shell. Then, slowing down until I floated almost motionless, I pondered the problem of my search.

I had to cover as much as possible of the moon's surface, and that within a very short time. The best plan, as I saw it, was to head for the center of the lighted area, mount to a position some fifty miles above ground, and there begin a spiral journey, watching the landscape through television. Of course, there was the chance that the Martian force, wherever it was, might discover me first; but, since they were many and large and I was one and small, that chance was a slim one. And, even if they swarmed out after me, that by itself would show me where they were. Such knowledge once mine, I would trust to my craft's heels to give me a chance to make use of it.

SOON, therefore, I was travelling in an ever-increasing circle over the silent stretches. What appearance the Martian raiders' base would take I did not know, but I was sure that any movement or incongruity would be triply noticeable in the ghostly stillness below.

I flew over plains, over mighty mountain ranges and bare, quiet valleys. The landscapes were as uncanny as those that arise in dreams. Often some strange sight impelled me to drop down for closer inspection, but never did I find traces of men or their works.

Hours passed. My chronometer, set in St. Louis, registered close to six o'clock. Another night would soon ride down upon my home, a night which might again bring the raiders, and I had not found their den as yet!

But just at that moment the television screen showed me something that brought my hands, all trembling, to correct the focus and clarify the image.

It showed me the interior of a crater, one of those that so plentifully pit the lunar surface. In it lay a dull-gleaming object of metal, cigar-shaped and evidently of great size. It was a Martian space-ship!

I glanced at my instruments, quickly calculated the crater's position, and fairly hurtled toward it. Unless a close lookout was being kept, aided by instruments for artificial vision, my little craft would appear only as a momentary flash of light. I therefore shot fearlessly to the very slope of the crater and then, after hovering for a moment, found a deep fissure into which I could lower my ship. The shadows of the moon are as deep and black as pools of ink, for, with no atmosphere to diffuse the sun's rays, there is no refracted light. Therefore, when I had fastened on my helmet, emerged and mounted to the lip of the crack, I could not distinguish my vessel a few feet beneath me.

The heat was terrific, even in my insulated space-suit. Yet I scrambled easily to the crater's edge, my Earth-trained muscles readily adjusting itself to the reduced force of lunar gravity. Cautiously hiding behind a projecting rock, I peeped into the great depression below.

Thunder! What a space-ship!

The television had given me no definite idea as to the true size of the Martian craft. Now, looking directly down upon it, I was stunned by its vastness. It was fully a mile in length, I quickly figured, and its greatest width, at the center, was perhaps 300 yards or slightly less. It tapered to a blunt point at either end.

In its interior must have been room for the laying out of a city, for the housing of regiments. Here and there on its upper surface bulged turrets and ports for observation, for weapons for instruments. Along its sides were lines of air-locks for the passage of men—a few of them were moving around near the ship, specklike by comparison—or for smaller vessels.

In what secrecy had the monster been conceived and built? At what cost and labor had it been completed, at what cost and labor was it operated? And how to conquer and destroy it?

With a growing chill of despair, I realized that no combat organization now in service with the World League could hope to vanquish so mighty a war vessel. Even a glance showed that, for offense and defense, it was equipped to a magnitude hitherto undreamed of.

It could spot a Terrestrial fleet and wipe it out at long range. Even our disintegrator rays would make small impress on its massive shell. My scouting expedition had availed little, after all. The thing was invulnerable!

Then a new thought came. Invulnerable, yes, as regarded assault from the outside. But might not a man find his way into it, and from there do much? I wore a Martian space-suit and was familiar with Martian manners. It was worth trying.

Boldly I stepped out from behind my rocks and began to descend the inner precipice.

CHAPTER III

Within the Ship

I REACHED the floor of the crater shortly and made my way toward the big ship where it towered aloft nearly a thousand feet. My path took me past groups of Martians in space-suits similar to mine, working in caves and pits. They were digging up various minerals and putting them in bags and containers, while other groups carried these toward the ship. My presence seemed to create no interest, and so I joined one silent detail of carriers headed for an air-lock.

The leader rapped out a signal on the lock panel, which swung open and admitted us. We passed through the lock chamber and I found myself in a busy corridor which, as I walked down it, gave in turn onto a larger one. The walls and the ceiling were of dull metal plating, while the floors were covered with some material that eased the feet and deadened sound.

Throngs of Martians, uniformed or in space-suits, moved hither and thither in ordered haste. Now and then a small vehicle with three or four wheels moved down the center of the passageway. On either hand, I saw, the metal partitions were pierced with panels, and some of these were open to disclose offices, machine-shops, eating-rooms or apartments, just as on a city street.

Already the carrying party to which I had attached myself had disappeared. Unshipping my helmet and slinging it to my belt, I looked around. At first glance I would still pass for a Martian and no man paid me any attention, but on the other hand I felt as though I were wandering aimlessly. I had gained the inside of the ship; how was I to take advantage of my position?

With an effort at a casual manner, I hailed a passer-by and asked him where to find the office of the commander.

He stopped and looked at me queerly. He was a black-browed fellow in the uniform of a sub-bomber. "What commander do you mean?" he asked.

"Who but the commander of this craft, friend?" I returned.

"And do you not know? Answer me that!"

"Why answer to such as you?" I said, affecting haughtiness and turning away from his disquieting questions. But he shouted to other Martians, who hurried up. In a moment I found myself surrounded.

"What's this?" sternly demanded an officer in the uniform of a flight commander, who had been attracted by the ripple of excitement.

"He asks strange questions, sir," said the sub-bomber respectfully, "and he doesn't answer the ones I ask. I don't know him or his rank. If I spoke sharply to him, it was because I thought I should."

"You have done well," answered the officer, observing me narrowly. "By the cut of his hair, this man is a Terrestrial."

"By birth only," I offered quickly. "I have never espoused the cause of Earth. I'm a deserter these six hours."

"Deserter? Here?"

"I stole a space-ship."

"And why did you come to this place?"

"To join you."

"You knew that we were posted here?" he queried sharply. "Not even our families on Mars know that—only a few officers in high places. Where did you get your knowledge?"

"I came on a wild guess."

"That is a spy's tale," he said scornfully. "If you were a real deserter, you'd have given yourself up as a prisoner outside and wouldn't have sneaked into our corridors."

It was plain to see that my case was a sorry one, and I racked my brain for more plausible lies to tell him. He sneered as he saw my confusion.

"Such zeal for a new cause is touching. The only trouble is that the whole story is too far out of focus. We aren't romanticists here, my Terrestrial friend. If you can't be more convincing, you'll be dead before another day has passed."

He turned to the others. "Make him fast. He's going to prison."

The black-browed bomber seized one of my arms and another Martian stepped up to help. For a moment I contemplated fierce resistance, but knew how useless that would be. Already others were gathering around, and nearly all of them were armed. I resigned myself to this reversal of fortune, just as another officer, wearing the insignia of a staff member, pushed through to us.

The flight commander saluted, Martian fashion, with a slight quick bow and both hands brought smartly to the forehead.

"We've captured a spy, sir," he said.

His superior turned toward me and my heart began to race like a motor.

It was Nalo!

A DELIGHTED smile lit up the handsome face of my old friend as, with a shout of welcome recognition, he sprang forward and threw his arms around me.

"Chac! Chac!" he cried. "I never thought to see you so soon! What are you doing here with us?"

"As I tried to explain," I stammered, "I deserted the Terrestrials and came here by chance."

"Of course! Of course! How fortunate that you should do so!"

He addressed the others. "I'll assume responsibility for this man," he said, "and myself will turn him over to the commander's office. I trust him, for he was long a resident of Mars and is not in sympathy with those who brought on the war. Is that sufficient for you?"

"It is sufficient," said the flight commander a little glumly, as he saluted and walked away with the others.

"And what will happen when I go to the commander's office?" I asked Nalo when we were alone.

He laughed loudly. "As if I would permit it! Heavens, Chac, are you not well out of this war? Forget it, with its foolishness and its horror. May all others learn to despise it as I do! No, you will be my guest here, no more. When the war is over—and it will be at the next opposition of the planets—you will go back with me to

Mars, won't you? And there you will see Yann again!"

To see Yann again! And her brother Nalo, who promised me that, was one of the raiders whose destruction I was sworn to accomplish! I choked in emotion, and Nalo, prince that he was, thought that I was sobbing with joy.

"I'm very close to crying myself, Chac," he said gently. "Come, my apartment is near this place.

We went up by a lift and thence to his quarters. There I doffed the space suit and my Terrestrial garments, while he gave me a plain Martian uniform from his own wardrobe.

"Lucky fellow!" he said as I pulled on the tunic. "No more war for you, ever!"

His words made me feel unutterably guilty as I stealthily retrieved my automatic pistol from the pocket of my discarded space-suit and tucked it out of sight in the waistband of my new costume.

He was delightedly ready to accept the story I told to explain how I had come to the moon. When I was fully dressed we walked out together, he chattering the while about this vast and wonderful mother-ship that was the raiders' headquarters. It was manned, he said, by nearly 200,000 picked men, and in its hangars were a thousand swift combat ships. Nearly a hundred levels were included between its top and its base. The lives of its tremendous crew were supported by chemically produced foods, water and air, all successfully made on Mars for centuries.

"Such a vessel could conquer the world," I said.

"Not for a moment, Chac," laughed Nalo. Its very size makes that impossible. Why, it couldn't be operated inside Earth's gravity pull—no, not if it was but half the size. The engines had all that they could do to lift it away from Mars, where it encountered but one-third of Earth's gravity. Here on the moon, where an Earth man weights but a sixth of what he does at home it is slow and clumsy enough. No, it is only a movable fort, sort of hive for the little raiders."

He sent for food and we ate together in private. Then he left to attend to some of his duties as a member of the mother-ship's staff, leaving me to wander about freely.

Nalo's attitude made my task at once easy and hard. I was roving through the corridors, a Martian in appearance, able to view all the secret workings of the craft; but all this I did with a heavy heart, for only Nalo's friendly belief that I meant no harm had made it possible.

I hardened my resolve. I had been entrusted with a mission, and I must carry it through. My hand, and my hand alone, could halt the Martian raids on my native planet. Determined but downcast, I returned at last to Nalo's quarters. He was waiting for me.

"Back already?" he said. "I thought you would find enough to keep you interested for days."

"But I understand so little of what is going on, and I'm afraid to ask."

"I'll explain to you. Staff meeting's over. They're discussing the new raid on Earth."

"New raid?" I repeated. "Are they raiding again tonight?"

"You mean, of course, the night that is now on Earth. The lunar night won't be upon us for ever so long. No, they'll wait twenty-four of your hours and then shove off. It wouldn't do to have the raids too close together."

"Where will they attack?" I asked.

"Oh, Chicago and Omaha this time, to destroy factories for the building of space-ships. But why should you worry? The war is nothing to you, nor to me for the time being. I'm more interested in making a night of it. We have theaters, cafes, and there are three or four officers you'll remember? Shan't we have them in?"

"Not just yet, Nalo," I said, speaking slowly to control my voice, which was perilously near to breaking. "I'd much rather just visit all parts of the car."

"As you say. Where shall we go first?"

"Is it possible to see the atmosphere plant?"

"Absolutely. Come along."

His rank was sufficient passport to the sentinel who guarded the doorway to the small but complex laboratory. Inside the workers showed us the machinery, the plans of the system, the control boards that hurried the air's circulation or shut it off, and the levers that could, if necessary, be operated to open big valves and exhale gases from the structure."

"These levers work thousands of vents," said Nalo. "As you can imagine, they can be put into many combinations. Don't touch them. You might evict the air from some apartment or corridor, and possibly it would cause trouble."

"But if all the master levers were thrown wide?" I asked.

"Then every gaseous substance in the whole car would be gone in about ten winks," said the supervisor of the plant.

"I see; if something went wrong, it might kill everyone."

"Not as bad as that. At the first hint of trouble with the apparatus, these automatic alarms would sound throughtout the ship. There are space-suits in each apartment, and the men would quickly don them. Then they would be safe until all was running smoothly again."

We left, Nalo talking gaily, myself quiet and preoccupied. At last I knew how to do my duty.

True to Orders

IT was late when we returned to my friend's quarters. Nalo still wanted to invite our acquaintances in, but I begged him not to do so. I could not have stood it.

At last we lay down on separate pallets and I kept quiet until Nalo's breathing became measured in sleep. Then I carefully arose and donned my space-suit. The automatic I transferred again to the outside pocket. I searched until I located the exhaling valve which, according to the men at the atmosphere laboratories, was to be found in every apartment. This I carefully blocked with wadded cloth. Then I left, closing the panel tightly after me.

The lights were dimmed in the corridors and few persons were afoot. I went unchallenged to

a lift which took me to the level of the laboratory. There I approached its doorway to find, as I had expected, a vigilant sentry on guard.

Unhesitatingly I walked toward him until he presented his automatic rifle and called on me to halt.

"Let me in," I said, the radio attachment in the helmet making my voice audible. "I have a message for the superintendent."

"Have you a permit?" he asked warily.

"Certainly," I answered, taking from my pocket a folded paper. As he reached for it, I suddenly sprang upon him. With one hand I grasped his throat, shutting off his cry of surprise and with the other I twisted his weapon from his grasp and flung it up the corridor. Then, clenching my fist inside the heavy, metal-jointed glove, I struck him a heavy blow on the jaw. He dropped without a sound. Leaping over him as he rolled senseless at my feet, I pulled aside the panel of the laboratory, stepped in, and pulled it shut after me.

Half a dozen men were working inside. I quickly approached the air-forming machinery. The first of the workers to look up seemed to catch the menace in my attitude for, with an exclamation, he made for the alarm apparatus.

I snatched my automatic from my pocket and shot him dead in his tracks, hurrying forward as another dashed to take his place. We met in front of the instrument and, even as his hand was stretched out to press the button and warn all the thousands in the mothership, I brought the heavy barrel of my gun down on his head. He slumped to the floor, while I grasped the board to which the alarm mechanism was bolted and, suddenly exerting all my strength, tore it from its fastenings. A spark of blue flickered and died as the electric connections parted. It was wrecked.

Three of the others had drawn their guns. They now fired at me, all at once, but all three bullets, by some good fortune, missed me. The fourth man darted for the panel that led to the corridors.

I aimed and pressed the trigger. No report! The blow that I had struck with my automatic had somehow jammed it.

Desperately I hurled the gun. It crashed against the back of his head as he ran, and he fell to his hands and knees, stunned. Now I was arrayed, empty-handed, against three desperate Martians, all armed. I quickly knelt to fumble for whatever weapons might be on the person of the man I had knocked away from the alarms.

That quick move downward must have saved my life for, at the same moment, all three fired again, then rushed me. As it was, one bullet grazed my helmet with a deafening rasp, and it would certainly have pierced me had I been standing.

I stood up as the trio closed in and, catching the nearest one around the waist, swung him from his feet and hurled him against his fellows. The three rolled, shouting, on the floor, together while leaping onto the squirming pile, I stamped and kicked as shrewdly as I knew how. I planted a heel upon a skull and felt its owner subside. Another man rose to his knees, but went down again as I kicked him behind the ear. I sprang away and made for the levers that controlled the exhalations of the tremendous ship.

One man staggered to his feet and tackled me around the knees. Down we clattered, while he tried to stab me with a dagger. Its blade glanced from a metal rivet in my space-suit and a moment later I caught and twisted his arm until he dropped the blade.

Still he fought to keep me from the levers. My strength, developed on Earth, was more than twice his, but he was unhampered by a space-suit and nearly made up the difference in desperation. Through my helmet's goggles I could see his distorted face, now close, now receding, and today it remains the clearest memory of that fight in the laboratory.

For half a minute we wrestled and I could not shake him off. Stern knocking sounded at the door. Then it partially opened. At the same time I managed to twist the fingers of my left hand in my adversary's hair and jerk his head forward. Raising my right metal-lined hand high, I chopped him on the back of the neck with its edge. He collapsed and I twisted out of his grip.

At the door appeared a throng of Martians, most of them with weapons of various sorts. Astonishment halted them momentarily, else assuredly I would have been struck down. But already I had reached my objective. One master lever I pulled—another—another and another, until all were thrown wide. A sudden gust of wind seemed to shriek in the room and in the corridor beyond. The men at the door fell in a writhing heap. A strange black exultation, that had nothing of joy, swelled in me.

I had succeded in my mission.

CHAPTER IV

Traitor!

A HEAVY wrench was on a stand nearby. I grabbed it and attacked the air-forming machinery. At my first blow it rattled. A few more strokes stopped it entirely. Then I ran back to the master levers and so hammered and bent them that it would take some time and labor to move them from their position. This done, I sprang over the tortured forms at the door and ran up the corridor.

Everywhere, as far as I could see, lay dead and dying Martians. Singly and two and three deep they lay, silent or quivering, along my pathway. But I found a lift and quickly dropped it to the floor where Nalo was quartered. But a few seconds more found me at his apartment, from which, despite my precautions, air was escaping. Entering, I saw him gasping on the floor.

"Nalo!" I cried. "Up, man, there's no time to lose!"

I lifted him up and reached for his space-suit where it hung on the wall. He looked at me uncomprehendingly.

"Why, Chac? What has happened?"

"I've wrecked the atmosphere plant, Nalo," I said. "No matter how—I did it. I had to do it.

But I can't let you die like the rest of them. Here, get into this suit."

He shook himself free and staggered away, supporting himself against the wall.

"Wrecked the plant, Chac? You? That's a lie—you wouldn't."

"But I did. Everybody is dying and, if you don't hurry, you'll die, too. Come!"

He struck my hands away. "No help from you, you false friend!" he cried. "You ingrate, you traitor! Now you have made me a traitor as well!"

He collapsed to the floor, his senses all but gone. My heart went cold as I knelt and pulled the suit onto him. He feebly resisted, but the effort took the last of his strength. I fastened the helmet onto his senseless head and let in some oxygen. Unconsciously, his lungs drew in the life-giving element. I raised him and laid him on the pallet. Later, when my work was finished, I would return and save him. He would have to forgive me.

But other problems still presented themselves. In the corridors moved a few men who had been able to don their space-suits before it was too late. Perhaps they would find a way to recover their mighty craft, to prepare it and once more menace my planet. I must totally disable the mother-ship.

The lifts were stalled, and I ran up one flight of stairs after another until I came to the apartment where the radio bomb controls were located.

Before me was television apparatus. With its aid I sent one bomb after another roving through corridors and shafts. The first went to destroy the steering apparatus, the second to wreck the engineroom, the third to complete the work I had done in the air-forming laboratory. Last of all I directed one to a magazine aft, where a great store of bombs was kept.

A moment later the mighty ship trembled in every atom with the explosion. The ship would be utterly unfit for movement now, I knew. My final act was to turn my automatic upon the bomb controls themselves and, with a series of careful shots, put them out of commission. Satisfied, I again descended to the level of Nalo's apartment and entered.

The detonation of the magazine had torn metal beams from the ceiling. Two of them pinned him down on his pallet. With the strength of anguish I lifted them away. Too late! His back was broken.

But his dead face was no longer stamped with an expression of hate, as when I had last seen it. When he had died, loathing for me had not been with him. Tears ran down my cheeks and fogged the glass goggles of my helmet as I gazed upon the body of my friend and knew that at the last Nalo had found it in his heart to forgive me.

I turned away and, descending to the lowest levels, found an air-lock. I crept through this like some noisome creature and walked away from that colossal and stricken hulk. A little knot of Martians in space-suits signalled to me from the distance, but I mounted the inside wall of the crater unheedingly. At the top I looked back once at the wrecked mother-ship. Truly, it would never again send out and receive raiders of the Earth.

After a brief moment of searching, I located my hidden vehicle. Once inside, I swiftly soared away on the road back. I took off my helmet and, tossing it aside, caught a reflection of my face in the dark, idle glass screen of the television. It was haggard, burning-eyed, sorrowful as death. My experience had wrought a deep and indelible change in me.

And that was the end of my adventure, the adventure which, in the minds of many, gives me an outstanding place among the individual heroes of the Interplanetary War. Yet neither then nor ever afterward could I find it possible to rejoice that it was I who wrecked the mother-ship of the Martian raiders.

I WAS apathetic enough when I arrived at the St. Louis rocket port in the early morning. Before I was through checking in my ship, the three men who had sent me came rushing up. Goldansky was congratulatory; Atrim was full of questions; and my uncle, almost clairvoyant in his sympathy with me, sensed my feelings and said little in front of the others. We two strolled away to his office at last, while I told him the whole story. When I had finished he clasped my hand.

"I'm proud of you, Jack," he said. "No man could have had a harder time of it. But I know that you don't care to talk any more about it."

"I don't, uncle."

"Then let's stick to shop. You know, of course, that you're to lead a combat group back to the Martian base."

"So I understand."

An orderly appeared with a communication from the High Command. The general officers of the Terrestrial forces had heard of my feat and were offering their congratulations. Soon they proposed to entertain me. In the meantime secrecy must be observed, until the Martian power on the moon was blotted out forever.

At first there had been talk of repairing and garrisoning the enormous shell which I had partially destroyed, but this plan was swiftly discarded. Late in the afternoon of that same day, I once more took to space, this time in the cabin of a squadron commander's ship.

It was easy to lead the expedition to the scene of my late conquest. We swooped down like a flock of vultures, taking up positions on the flanks of the mighty hulk. Some few survivors in space-suits came forward eagerly to surrender as our party entered the air-locks.

These prisoners were questioned thoroughly. They readily told our officers that the mother-ship represented the one Martian base on the moon, and they also served as guides throughout the airless corridors.

A number of the smaller raiding ships were found to be in fair running order, and these were manned and loaded with all that could be salvaged. Then, with explosives and disintegrator rays, wrecking parties set to work on the structure. For hours they labored, and in the end the mighty mother-ship was utterly wrecked, no longer fit as a menace or a threat to the Earth.

I took part in none of this. My only act, after guiding the expedition to the spot, was to find and carry out the body of Nalo to take the remains back with me.

When we returned, and not until then, the news was broadcast throughout the earth that the Martian marauders had been obliterated. Loud was the noise of thankful celebration, and I feel sure that every person loyal to the Terrestrial cause took part in it—all save myself.

For I was concerned with Nalo's funeral. His body was burned and the ashes scattered, according to Martian usage. His belt, his automatic pistol, and half a dozen mementoes I put away in a locker. So long as they exist, they will recall memories of a gallant and too-faithful friend.

Goaded and stimulated, the manufacturers of fighting equipment speeded up their work, and preparation went on throughout the remainder of the year. The resources and labors of the entire earth were expended to build thousands of space-ships, to equip, maintain and train the millions of men needed to meet the Martians when the final battle came. Come it would, every Terrestrial knew. And then, there would be as tremendous, as awful a conflict as mortal creatures ever saw.

The Crisis Approaches

IT is not for me to discuss the policy of Martian commanders in sending four separate forces to attack Earth, instead of combining them into one. Some commentators have stated that the Martians made erroneous calculations for the joining of those forces in space. Others claim that they hoped to split and destroy separately the Terrestrial combat groups. And there have been rumors of misinterpreted orders and similar blunders. However, those who really know—the officers who launched the Martian attack in the winter of 2676—have remained silent to a man. Until they speak, the curious must whistle for an explanation. I, for one, cannot give it.

In late November of the year 2676, scouts and radio brought news that a tremendous combat group had left the enemy planet, now approaching opposition, and was making for Earth at top speed.

The number of Martian craft, large and small, was estimated at 800,000. They were granted some eighty days in which to come within striking distance of Earth. So formidable a fighting organization had never before existed, save on paper; but we Terrestrials, knowing that our ready forces numbered more than twice as many ships, were not panicky. We were more interested and serious at the news that came early in December, when a second Martian group, similar in size and makeup to the first, was reported en route to Earth.

Shortly before Christmas orders came directing all Terrestrial combat units to stand ready for clearing on the first of February. At that time we totalled 700,000 craft, ranging in size from mighty dreadnoughts of space to fleet scouts that held no more than five or six men. The crews that would serve and fight these ships mustered fully forty millions. These forces represented the wealth of a world and the flower of its manhood.

A vast armada! But in the first week in January a third mighty mass of Martians was reported on the way. A desperate and almost even fight seemed assured, with the advantage on the side of the enemy. Everywhere one heard laughing and joking, forced out to hide the real concern which grew steadily as the jumping-off date approached.

During the last week of January, I received orders to report for active duty on the campaign. In the event of our landing on Mars, I was to help in establishing Intelligence Department headquarters there. My assignment was to the ship of Flight Commander Putnam, who headed a group of the swiftest combat ships of the entire service.

I quickly made friends with him and with the junior officers of his ship—Captain Ferman, in charge of the ray-guns, and Captain Sughrue, chief of the engineers and flight mechanic. Both were young men, about my own age, and inclined to view the coming struggle in the light of an exciting adventure.

They showed me how well equipped was their craft and its consorts for flight, speed and observation. Their only wish was for Martians on which to demonstrate their prowess.

We cleared from St. Louis, together with a thousand other ships. All over Earth, rocket ports saw mighty swarms of ships take to space. Once outside the limits of the atmosphere, we speeded up and drew into our appointed position, keeping contact with foreign units on either hand.

"Germans to the right," said the veteran Putnam, indicating the positions of our neighbors in one of the television screens. "Stout fellows and great space-wranglers, those boys. Our greatest speed engineers have been German—Manvel, Pfeffer, Schoenecker and the rest. The pioneers were Martians, of course, but they had little to teach these chaps."

"And who have we to the left?" asked Ferman.

"Chinese, I think," answered the commander, bending his grizzled head close to the screen. "They're good men to have along on this sort of business. Wide-awake, tricky, brave as the bravest."

He turned dials to clarify the image. "That nearest flight belongs to Wu Ting Fang. I know him well. His men are perhaps as clever with ray-guns as you'll see."

"No more so than my Missourians, I'll bet," said Ferman quickly.

"I hope yours are as good, captain," replied his superior. "There will be need for all their skill."

Our ships moved at an easy pace that day, and the next day, and the next. Our commanders proposed to operate on the defensive at first, with the Martians engaging us at a great distance from their own bases. Both machinery and morale would suffer from the long journey, went the argument, and a stiff resistance would be doubly effective.

I am sure the battle would have gone according to our calculations had the opposing forces remained as we figured them when we jumped

off. But, on the morning of the fourth day, an orderly came from the radio locker to hand Commander Putnam a slip of paper. The officer's face became stern when he read it.

"Gentlemen," he said to the three of us as we looked at him in surprised concern, "this is bad. A final group of Martians has just cleared."

"How large?" I asked.

"As large as the others, it says here."

Sughrue made a rapid calculation. "Lord! They have 1,200,000 ships in space this moment!" he groaned.

"They could trade us ship for ship and still have half a million left with which to sack the cities of Earth!" added Ferman in equally gloomy tones. "Even at that, they may have more to come."

"It's not as bad as it seems," said the commander. "Our ships are faster and better manned than theirs, and we're far better armed. These ray-guns will do a great deal toward evening the odds."

It was small comfort, but it served to recall the two junior officers to better spirits. The news was relayed to other ships of the flight, while we in the commander's ship wondered what change this latest threat might have in our plans and our fate.

We had not long to wonder. The radio orderly appeared with another slip. Putnam eagerly scanned it, then held it out to us.

"We're not on the defensive, after all," he cried. "We're going to meet and attack the first Martian combat group!"

CHAPTER V

Earth Smites

AGAIN the news was passed along and Sughrue scampered away to his engines. In a moment we shot forward at an increased clip. The television showed our neighbors on all quarters closing in rapidly, and the whole force concentrating.

"What's our new policy?" asked Ferman.

"A simple and logical one," said Putnam. "Our position is that of a giant who could conquer me alone, or you, or Stillwell, or Sughrue, alone. If the four of us rushed him at once, however, we could finish him easily. His best plan, therefore, would be to meet and defeat us singly.

"We are a single force of 700,000 ships. The Martians outnumber us, but they are divided into four groups, millions of miles apart. We're fast-moving and hard-hitting. If we can tackle them singly, we have a good chance of cleaning them all up, a group at a time, or at least crippling them so that they won't be able to present a menace to Earth."

"In the meantime, what happens to us?" I inquired.

"In the meantime, my boy, you have one chance in I don't know how many of ever seeing St. Louis again."

Sughrue, back from the engines, called us to the television apparatus. "The Martians!" he cried.

In the screen was the image of a cloud of glittering specks against a black sky, like a strange new star-cluster. "Martians, sure enough," agreed the commander. "The sun shines on them, making them visible to us. That must be the first group." He quickly checked up some figures on a movable scale. "They can't be so much as six hours away."

Radio messages came, bearing commands to stand by and prepare for action. Our screen showed the Martians shifting to open formation. Other, larger specks of light moved into our field of vision.

"Those are ships of our own advance parties, far ahead," said Putnam. "Look—there's the flash of a ray-gun. They're opening the game."

He turned to the radio orderly. "What have you now? Well, thank God, here's our order to join in. Full speed ahead, Sughrue. We're going to get our feet wet!"

It seemed no more than moments until Ferman, with the guns forward, shouted that the Martians were within range. At almost the same time, the floor beneath me gave a sharp lurch.

"What's that?" I asked, staggering to keep my balance.

"That's Sughrue," replied Putnam, holding on by a rail. "He was snapping us out of the way of a roving bomb." He spoke into a microphone. "Well, Ferman?"

"The Martians are jumpy, too," came back Ferman's voice. "One big fellow is skipping away from us like a dog playing with the water from a garden hose. Whup!" he laughed exultantly. "We've put the finger on him!"

The television showed me half a dozen duels between members of our flight and Martians. Putnam, scanning the screen with practiced eye, rushed a series of radio orders to various ship commanders. They must have been very good orders indeed, for in a few moments our flight had accounted for twelve enemy ships and was driving away all others for some little distance around, while only two of our craft were lost.

"We've got 'em on the run!" Ferman's voice was crying.

"Because they weren't Class A fighters," said Putnam, "I'm glad it wasn't worse. Hi, Orderly! Radio my compliments to Captain Janecki commanding Number Seven. Call his attention to Number Six, hit by Martians. Tell him to go aboard and see if he can put her in running order again. We'll need her."

In the meantime the battle was raging at a little distance to our front and to both flanks. Our superior numbers and armament counted heavily. Television glimpses showed Martians falling back on every hand, their ranks badly depleted.

"What now, sir?" asked Sughrue's voice, microphoned from the engine-room.

"Pursuit, orders say," answered Putnam. "Full speed ahead again."

Our flight rapidly overtook a group of retreating Martians. I went forward to Ferman's ray-guns, and through the target-finders saw one, then another enemy craft explode to nothingness.

"Better for them if they'd stop and fight,"

said the young captain. "Humph, that's just what they're going to do! Look at the boys in our flight. There are Numbers Nine, Twelve and Thirteen, all tying in. Now the others. Fifteen's hit. Too bad—not quick enough to dodge that roving bomb. Man, how the ray-guns are coming through!"

Again the Martians were melting all along the way. Yet their resistance was not in vain. In some places, we learned, they gave fully as good as they received before retreating. At last the order was sent along to proceed at a reduced pace, letting the fragments of the enemy group make their escape.

Our own flight of thirty vessels had lost but three, while nowhere in our immediate neighborhood had our companion flights lost heavily. In the meantime, orders from the High Command were received in which all Terrestrial units were praised for the speed and dispatch shown in administering defeat to the enemy.

"If the others are as easily beaten as that, it'll be a picnic," grinned Sughrue.

As if in satirical answer, the latest radiogram arrived.

It told that the second and third Martian groups had merged into a single mass of 600,000 ships, a body in itself nearly equal to our entire force. Meanwhile the fourth group was hurrying to join in.

WHAT followed is known to every schoolboy is remembered at first hand by millions of veterans on two planets.

We were no longer in a position where a slight advantage in offensive weapons would make us victors. We had shattered one group, yes; but the three remaining, if combined into one, would still outnumber us hopelessly. Our salvation lay in quick maneuvering, and our High Command knew it. The quickly laid plan, therefore, was to hurry across space and interpose the Terrestrial group between the two Martian gatherings. With things so ordered, we would have a fighting chance for success and survival.

The fourth Martian group had the start of us, but here our faster flight mechanism stood us in good stead. In the six-day dash that ensued, our formation took the shape of a comet with tail flaring backward. The head was made up of the light, speedy units, Putnam's among them. Larger and heavier vessels followed, with the big, slow transports at the very tip of the tail.

As it was, the race developed into a question of minutes. The first five or six Terrestrial flights dashed in between the two hostile bodies at last, winners by the shortest of noses. The Martians reeled and hesitated before the blazing ray-guns, then retaliated with such deadly effect that practically all the Terrestrial van was wiped out. The heroic sacrifice of those ships, however, served its purpose, for, almost at the moment of joining their fellows, the foremost members of the smaller Martian group dropped back for a moment; and then it was too late. More Terrestrials sped into the gap, quickly deploying to keep the Martians separated.

We were hotly beset on both sides. Putnam's twenty-seven ships, going into action close behind the luckless first flights, were diminished by nine within five minutes. The others, fighting pluckily against overwhelming numbers of Martians, would soon have gone the same way but for the providential arrival of Terrestrial dreadnoughts. These, with long-range disintegrators effective at thousands of miles, drove back our immediate antagonists.

Other flights around us also lost heavily, but in the meantime the gap was kept open, while more and more of our fellows poured into take up position in it.

An hour passed before the fighting was on anything approaching equal terms, and for thirty minutes the conflict raged unceasingly, while the Terrestrial position grew constantly stronger and stronger. We were now like a curtain hanging between two swarms of wasps of unequal size—angry wasps, endowed with motion and intelligence, that with murderous valor strove again and again to tear apart the curtain's fibers and join into one enormous and invincible swarm.

In Commander Putnam's ship, floating gracefully in a locality where the battle had lulled, the veteran was pouring over diagrams and tables of figures in an effort to visualize the engagement.

"Our formation is coin-shaped," he explained. "It is thousands of miles across and thousands of miles thick. This whole battle is being waged over a section of space large enough to hold Earth, Mars, and the moons of both planets."

"How are we holding up?" asked Ferman, biting hungrily at an apple which had been his sole food in twenty-four hours.

"Splendidly, it seems. I haven't had much time until now to compare messages from other flights, but, so far as I can make out, we're doing our part, and more."

At this juncture came orders for our unit to speed to the edge of the position, where all the fast ships were being gathered to prevent any effort of one Martian group to creep around our flank and join the other. It was comparatively quiet out on the flank of the battle, and we had time to observe the conflict through our television—a conflict that looked like a myriad points of light against the black sky, a Milky Way that seethed and churned as the divided Martian forces strove desperately but in vain to hammer their way through us and to merge into one army.

At last the moment arrived when the Terrestrial force had achieved its desired position and formation. Then, like a flash, orders were radioed to ships great and small. The whole coin-shaped mass swung sharply away from the larger enemy host and rushed upon the smaller. The distances, great as they seemed, were relatively as nothing to the mighty space-eating mechanisms, now roaring at fullest pitch. A concerted operation of ray-guns withered away the first ranks of Martians like flies in the flame of blow-torches. Those further back, confused by the sudden assault, were slow at resisting.

Meanwhile our formation suddenly slowed down in the center and speeded up along the edge, transforming its shape to that of a dish to hold the Martians in its center. Our ceaseless fire from the front was augmented by attacks on

every flank of the enemy. In vain did the Martians fight back. It was but a matter of minutes before the entire group, which had left its native planet with 300,000 craft, was crumpled up, demoralized and shot to pieces.

Another order flashed out, and we fell away, none too soon. The larger Martian organization, surprised for a short space, had rushed upon us as we turned our backs, and we had to whip around to defend ourselves. At last we were on somewhat even terms. At the moment, according to government records, each side mustered about four hundred thousand ships. All others, totalling nearly a million, had been destroyed or disabled in the fight.

And so might we have fought until the work of destruction was complete and the last craft dropped to pieces in space. Already Putnam's ship bore down on a Martian adversary. Ferman was setting his ray-guns upon it, and Sughrue was holding his engines at full tone to dodge away from bombs. But the newest order was rushed from the radio. Putnam snatched it.

"Cease hostilities at once," he read excitedly. "An Armistice has been signed."

And Afterward

AND so, with no decisive victory on either side, the two forces fell apart and hung silent in space. A little later came directions for both sides to return to bases. A truce had been made, said the dispatches, and Martian envoys were hurrying to Earth to make terms and pledge better understanding.

Terrestrial delegates were also sent to Mars. I arrived at St. Louis shortly before their ship left, and my uncle secured me a place among the young officers who went as attaches. Early in March we cleared for a journey that, even when the craft exerted the utmost power at its command, seemed to me at least, to be but a crawl.

We docked in Ekadome, the City of Martian Rulers, to be courteously received and entertained. That awful battle in space had demonstrated the utter and dreadful senselessness of armed conflict. There was grave, courteous discussion and agreement. Afterward, a dinner was announced, with the Terrestrials as guests.

But I slipped away as evening came down, and hailed a electro-car. The driver eyed my Terrestrial uniform glumly, but accepted me as a fare. We slid once more through familiar subterranean ways, to where a lift would bring me to the surface in another part of the city. With beating heart I mounted and stood again before the gateway from which I had once departed almost in tears.

My heart was like ice within me and my eyes swam as I slowly pushed that gate open and walked in. The huge, brilliant flowers, the seat beneath the strange clump, were as they had been, but no one was there. Walking to the seat, I dropped into it.

"Who are you, Terrestrial?" said a startling soft voice near at hand. I rose quickly and looked to see the dark eyes of Yann as they widened.

"Yann! Oh, Yann!" I said, and clenched my hands in desperate futility of speech or action.

"Have you truly come, Chac?" she said in muffled tones. "Sit down. How tired you look! And your hair, it is streaked with gray."

I was sitting again, and once more I felt her hands on my head.

"Don't touch me—don't touch me!" I cried wildly. "Yann, I would not have come, had it not been that I could not stay away!"

"Chac, you are ill; see how your hands tremble."

"My hands! Yann, do you know that they are red with the blood of Nalo, your brother?"

"I know it, Chac, I know it."

"You know it!" I was aghast. "How could you know it?"

"When one world rang with your praise, would not the other hear? We all knew what you did, alone against thousands. My father cursed you bitterly, swore vengeance. Better had he kept silent. He was killed in the final battle."

Had she wept or screamed or reviled, I might have found more to say. I might have offered explanations, defenses. But, since her voice was soft and calm, I could do nothing but rise in silence and walk toward the gate.

"Chac!" Yann was running after me. "Chac, where are you going?"

"To Earth. I must never look at you again."

"But, my dear!" she caught my hands. "I have lost so much in this war. Must I lose you as well?"

She gripped my shoulders. "I bade you go and do your part in honor or bravery—don't you remember? I prayed, of course, that you and Nalo might never meet. But things turned out otherwise—and what else could you have done?"

My heart beat wildly as, at last, I dared look into her eyes.

"The worlds now see war in all its scurvy reality," she went on. "Well might they have let the battle continue so long as one drop of blood flowed in a fighting man, or so long as there remained a ship or a gun or a bomb. But they have stopped, have sworn to forget the strife and to build on what is left. Surely, Chac, we can follow so good an example?"

Now I knew her for a thing more lovely, more wise and more desirable than even my dreams of her had been. I trembled as I put my arms around her and drew her pliant form close.

"I haven't much time here, Yann," I murmured. "Tomorrow, or the next day, our ship must start back, before the planets draw too far apart. Will you go with me?"

"Gladly, dearest love."

"You'll love it on Earth, Yann. The fields and meadows are green there, instead of blue and red and orange. The days are not too hot, nor the nights too cold. And there are mighty seas of water, stretching beyond your sight. I can't tell you a tenth of Earth's beauties. And there are friends there too, sweetheart, kind, courteous people such as you will love."

"I know, I know. How sad that the war was needed to assure one world of the humanity of the other. But let us sorrow no more, lover—come to me!"

Her kiss was a final comfort and a blessing.

THE END

Into Plutonian Depths

(*Continued from page 365*)

we saw a cluster of wavering lights. Realizing how unwise it would be to be seen by any of the natives—for might they not detect and frustrate our plan?—we began to act with lightning rapidity. Each of us in turn flung out our arms and for one brief moment held the moist-cheeked Zandaye close against us; then, while she stood lamenting, "My friends, do not go! Do not go! You will be frozen!", we hastily began to leave.

Resorting to a plan that had often served us before, I bent down; while Stark, springing to my shoulders, gained a grip on the projecting rim of the upper tunnel. With a powerful tug, he hauled himself to the base of the stairway; then, seizing my hands as I sprang into the air and snatched at the gallery's rocky edge, he pulled and strained mightily, until, in a few seconds, I stood panting in safety beside him.

"Good-bye, Zandaye!" I cried, gazing down upon her sorrowful form.

"Good-bye, good-bye, Zandaye!" cried Stark.

"Good-bye, dear friends!" she mourned. "Good-bye! I will never, never forget you. But oh, to think you are going into the Desolate Tunnels—to be frozen!"

The glimmering lights from down the corridor were now growing much brighter. And so, with a last glance back to Zandaye, who stood waving and waving to us while still lamenting, "Oh, my friends, you'll be frozen! You'll be frozen!", Stark and I reluctantly started up the long, dark stairway.

* * * * *

Since we no longer had our flash-lights, it was hours before we had felt our way to the top of that tremendous, icy flight of steps. Then, coming out into the open, we found to our joy that no storm was blowing, and that the stars and the remote, dim sun were shining peacefully through the deep twilight of the frozen plains. Exhilarated at the sight of the heavens and at our first breath of the outer air after the many months of confinement, we began searching for our *contragrav* car, which had disappeared long before during the tempest. To our relief, it was only a minute before we espied the well-known seventy-foot form looming like a blue-white specter amid the ice-fields a few hundred yards away. Evidently, bewildered by the blizzard, we had wandered in circles after losing the car, and had been within a stone's throw of safety without realizing it!

Although encrusted with ice, *The Wanderer of the Skies* was undamaged. Our food supplies were intact within the sealed interior; our scientific instruments and other equipment had not been harmed. All that we had to do was to scrape the ice from the car; to repair the small hole made by the meteorite; to gather a few tons of ice for the return trip—and then to enter the car, adjust the *contragrav* screens, and start the gasoline motors. . .

But these preliminaries could not be completed for eight or ten days; and during the interval we were afraid that the Head Neuter, mastering his dread of the Desolate Tunnels, would send a searching party after us, to capture us and bring us back to justice. . . But nothing so tragic occurred, and finally we had the inexpressible pleasure of seeing ourselves rise above the planet's surface. . .

Seven months later, after an uneventful trip, we returned to the earth. But there was an unfortunate miscalculation about our landing, which took us far out of our course and brought us down on a peak of the Canadian Rockies instead of in the Eastern United States. *The Wanderer of the Skies*, in the violent descent, was smashed to fragments, and its remains are still to be found amid the snow and ice of that dismal eminence. But Stark and I were lucky enough to escape with only a few bruises, and eventually made our way back to civilization, although we had not so much as a scrap of paper or a bit of Plutonian clothing to display in testimony to our epoch-making flight. My only memento of the trip is a large bald spot just above the forehead, where my head-lamp checked the growth of the hair; while Stark retained a bit of the crystal from his lamp, which, however, was found upon chemical analysis not to differ very much from the crystal in use in our own world.

None the less, we are not discouraged. We are planning to construct a large *contragrav* car and make a second flight to Pluto as soon as we can collect the two million dollars necessary to defray expenses. We believe that the cost of the expedition will be repaid by means of the gold and precious stones which we shall find in the Afflicted Regions; while at the same time we are drawn on by the thought of a certain blue-eyed young lamp-head, who, we still hope, may be persuaded to break her vows of Pre-Neuterhood and travel with us to the earth.

THE END

For two hours of enjoyment
treat yourself to Wonder Stories Monthly
See Page 373
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The Winged Menace

by **Packard Dow**

FOR the first occasion on his entire trip, the elderly Mr. Barton was not enjoying himself. He tried to read but laid the book aside, to rest back frowning in his chair, in the comfortably cool hotel room. He had looked forward to this sojourn in Algiers with his young niece before starting back to New York. Now Mrs. Crompton, a comfortable but determined dowager from home, had to intrude on the scene to mar the serenity of his stay. Not that the lady wasn't pleasant and well meaning. She was just too restless and feverish to meet on a pleasure trip such as this.

Mr. Barton had spent the greater part of his life with the Atlantic Steel Co. as a chemist, a highly paid and desirable position. He had retired recently, at the age of sixty-four, and immediately started out on an adventure which he had looked forward to all his life, but which his work had previously prevented him from undertaking. He wanted to tour Europe, every bit of it.

But somehow the idea of going alone at his age seemed a bit tasteless, and he hoped against hope that he might succeed in persuading his niece, Susan, to go with him. Her quick and enthusiastic assent surprised him and they had set out. Now they were resting in Algiers, the last place to be visited, to remain for two weeks before returning to America.

But relaxation was impossible. On the second day as Barton had passed through the lobby of the European hotel, a woman had fairly thrown herself upon him saying, "Why, Mr. Barton, imagine meeting you here and how opportune. You're just in time to come along on my

(Illustration by Marchioni)

The attack came at the next turn. A repulsive mass of black flying monstrosities choked the passage.

automobile party to visit those mysterious and awfully old ruins outside the city."

Though Barton was surfeited with ruins and mystery, he reluctantly accepted for himself and his niece.

* * * *

In spite of his annoyance, he dozed off to be awakened by the buzzer on the door. "Is it all right for me to come in, Uncle?" a feminine voice came through.

"Yes, my dear, I guess that I must have been snoozing," Barton struggled to stifle a yawn. The door opened, and a young girl of eighteen stepped in. One could not help but at once contrast the two. The elderly man strong and virile in spite of his years, with features clear and still firm. His niece with a strong graceful young body and her uncle's features softened and made beautiful.

"Guess whom I saw downstairs a minute ago," she said. "Mrs. Crompton. She was on the other side of the room. As I was talking to Dodo I didn't have a chance to say hello."

"I forgot to mention that I encountered her in the lobby today," said her uncle. "She gave us an invitation which out of politeness I had to accept. It seems that she had hired two automobiles and a guide in order to take some friends outside the city and show them over some ruins. Will you mind coming?"

"I told Dodo that I would let him show me around the native quarter bazaar tomorrow and perhaps pick up some interesting bargains. However, I can break the engagement," she added disappointedly.

"In that case why don't you invite your Italian

count along too," Barton advised. "I'm certain that Mrs. Crompton will not mind, in fact if I know her, she will be pleased. Besides the native bazaar is bound to be hot and dusty."

The girl's face lighted up, "I'll do that the first thing in the morning." After she had gone to her room, Barton thought over the new problem that was beginning to trouble him. He did not care for the young Italian Count, Dodo, that Susan was so friendly with. He felt that his attitude was rather silly, but it existed nevertheless. He would rather that she associate with that nice American in the hotel, Mr. Stanley. It was evident that Stanley would like to meet her.

Barton did not sleep well, rising early the next morning. The discomfort of the long night added to his disagreeable mood. He determined if such a thing was possible, not to get any pleasure out of the day's excursion.

At breakfast, Susan assured him that Dodo would be charmed to accompany the party.

Mrs. Crompton's guests assembled in the hotel plaza at eleven o'clock. The plan was to have a light lunch at the public restaurant out at the ruins.

The dowager was fluttering about her guests who were a rather assorted crowd of several nationalities. Barton had met Dodo and did not approve of him. He knew that Susan had not noticed the little lines of dissipation located around the eyes and mouth of the Italian. Otherwise the man was tall, athletic, and good-looking enough, while he possessed a carefully trained charm of manner.

Mrs. Crompton was quite proud of the guide she had secured. He was a native who evidently had more than the usual run of intelligence and education.

THE two open touring cars drew up and the party piled in. Mr. Barton found himself in the back of the second car beside an English gentleman of about his own age and a comfortable German spinster whose age was uncertain, both of whose names he had not caught. The cars started off each with a distinct jerk.

Barton felt the need of conversation. The German spinster seemed absorbed in the scenery, so he turned to the Englishman for inspiration.

"I'm Mr. Ralph E. Barton," he began as a means to accomplish his end.

"And I am Stephen Allison of London," the other answered genially. "Are you personally acquainted with our hostess?"

"She is a very old friend of mine. By the way what are these ruins we are going to see? I must admit that I have been heretofore in total ignorance of their existence."

"Few people know of them, and that is remarkable considering their antiquity and numerous strange features. I have visited the place before, so I know of what I speak. I will say frankly that I cannot decide what people built this temple if that is what it was. The style could never by any stretch of the imagination be termed Egyptian."

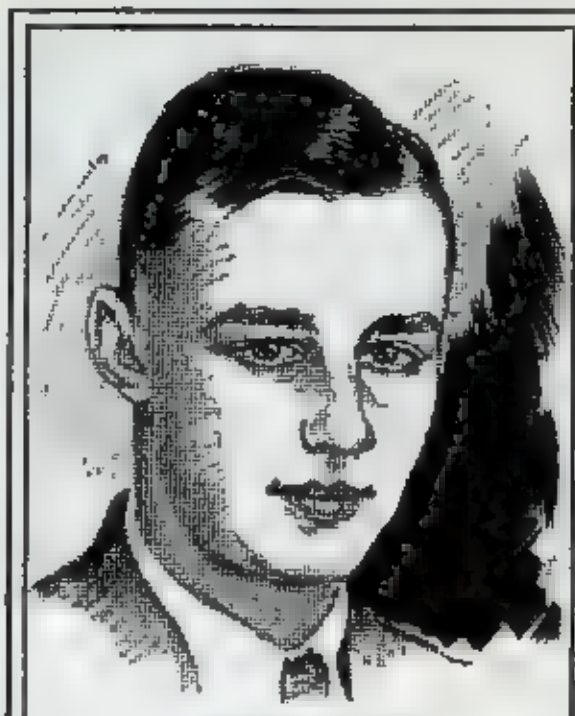
"That sort of thing is a little out of my line since I am a chemist by profession," Barton said interestedly, "but I can't understand why the ruins are not better known if they have the peculiarities you name."

"For one thing," came the answer, "they are outside the native quarter. Also they are close to civilization and easily accessible. We fellows have become accustomed to making our most valuable finds in the far places of the globe. Then there are a lot of dark superstitions surrounding the place. If you are certain that it will not bore you, I will give an idea of a few."

The car was passing through the native quarter. Unsavory sights and smells greeted them. Barton was finding his new acquaintance interesting.

"Not in the least," he replied earnestly, "Go ahead!"

"To come right to the point, the place is reputed to be the abode of a host of vampires. The tale that has been handed down among the natives is that hundreds of years ago, about the time of the Renaissance, I figure, the skies were darkened one day at sunset. A great horde of vampires circled above the city in the form of huge



PACKARD DOW

OUR folk-tales and legends are filled with horrible stories of grotesque beings, and supernatural occurrences. Man, at first, placed absolute belief in these tales but, as his intelligence and knowledge progressed, he scorned them as the outpourings of gloomy superstitious minds. But the cycle has again turned and man seeks more eagerly than ever in many of the superstitions of the past for the particles of truth that may exist in them, and that may give us new light on queer phenomena of nature that our ancestors observed. Mr. Dow has taken one such ancient tale and shown how, when traced to its source, it could lead to a most amazing series of adventures.

bats to descend into the ruins. The inhabitants rushed indoors to bar all doors and windows. When they finally summoned courage enough to venture forth, the vampires had disappeared. They had entered the vaulted chamber at the top and sought refuge in the depths. From that time until today, they have preyed by night upon young and old. Queer idea, isn't it?"

"It is," Barton answered. "One almost wonders how such elaborate folk lore can be built up from practically no basis."

"I'm not so sure that there is no basis," the Englishman declared earnestly. "Absolutely reliable witnesses have observed some strange things around here."

"You are not insinuating that you actually believe such nonsense," Barton queried indignantly.

"Do not misunderstand," Allison intervened in an aggrieved tone. "I mean that a cause explainable in terms of science could underlie all this superstition. I have a theory all my own explaining the fabled existence of vampires. It is true that many of the medieval tales concerning giants, dragons, and pigmies have been traced back for their origin to the one time existence of great prehistoric monsters and bestial types of men of prodigious strength and unusual size. Why could there not have been at one time a race of super-intelligent blood-sucking bats who preyed upon early mankind whenever possible but who now had become almost extinct?"

"That sounds reasonable enough," Barton ventured. "We know that some mighty strange forms of life dwelt on land and beneath the sea in those days. I suppose that fossil remains of such a species would have been found if they ever existed."

"Their bone structure might have deteriorated quickly," explained Allison. "The main thing about this possible race is that they must have been of a high order of intelligence, even approaching that of humans in some ways. Well, here we are, at the ruins so you can see them for yourself."

The cars had left the city, and the destination of the excursionists was just ahead. An artificial hill it seems had been thrown up in the middle of the plain. At various points on its steep sides, were level spaces. These extended up to within one hundred feet of the top on which a large pyramid-like structure was situated.

The Story of the Pyramid

THE latter gave a sinister touch. People were passing gaily around on the lower levels or taking lunch at the clusters of tables. Alone, etched against the sky, however, the pyramid appeared deserted and menacing. If in a position to catch a glimpse within, one received an impression of dark unearthly shadows which no amount of sunlight could dispel.

"I see you're fascinated already by the spell of the upper building," the Englishman smiled indulgently. "That is the entrance to the lower depths. Many watchers claimed to have seen leviathan-like bats come forth through it at sunset and return at dawn after a night of evil marauding. Only a few whites have ever gone up there and no natives. There is only a tortuous path to go by."

"How about those who have gone up?" Barton asked curiously. "Did they see anything to shock their sensibilities?"

"Many of them met with disaster. A great black hole of unknown depth lies in the center of the pyramid. No one has ever gone down the hole and returned. In the year 1910, three boys decided to go up. The visiting tourists below heard them cry out, and several men rushed up. When they got there, not a sign of the three was to be found. The natural conclusion was that they had all fallen down the hole. The authorities did not permit any attempts to recover their bodies, for there would be too much danger of a cave-in.

"Defiantly a party of young Americans sneaked out one night soon after the disaster with a rope ladder. One returned with a tale of horror stating how his companions had been seized by black flying monsters with long talons who had disappeared bearing them down the black hole, and how he had escaped the raking claws only because he was nearest the entrance.

"He was called mad. Scoffers showed how the deep scratches he exhibited had been acquired by the slide down the hill and that his friends had fallen into the pit in the dark. I remember more stories, but the details are rather dim."

The cars had spanned the remaining distance. The occupants were getting out and stretching their legs before looking over the ruins under the care of the guide. The latter not only spoke English without a flaw, but wore European clothes as though accustomed to them. Barton graciously thanked his new friend for relieving the monotony of the ride. Immediately he excused himself to look for his niece.

"Isn't this place just thrilling?" she exclaimed happily. "I never thought that it was going to be anything at all like this."

"I'm beginning to like it myself," her uncle agreed striving to create a reluctant breeze with his panama. The guide then directed the party to follow him and they started off. The levels were connected by stone steps thrown up at a recent date, each level circling the hill completely. The party passed around them all pausing to peer at the unfamiliar inscriptions and listening to the guide's clear informative explanations. At last the highest level was reached.

Mrs. Crompton held up her hand and beamed. "Now everybody, I have it all arranged for us to have luncheon up here before starting back." The group had become hungry by that time, so they moved enthusiastically to the tables. Barton had drifted away from his niece and her escort to return to chat with Mr. Allison. They found a table together.

Suddenly Susan stood before them her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkling.

"Oh, Mr. Allison, this is my niece, Susan," stated Barton by way of introduction.

"That is indeed surprising," said the Englishman. "I thought at first, Miss Norton, that you were father and daughter."

"People often make that mistake," she laughed. "I suppose we do look alike."

Turning to her uncle, "Dodo and I have just found out that no one has climbed up to the top of this hill since way back before the war. He wants me to make the attempt with him. Please don't refuse now; it will be all right," noting his quick frown.

Barton considered quickly. He did not want to make himself appear ridiculous before the girl by voicing any nonsensical superstitions. Yet he distinctly did not like the idea of her climbing up there, especially with that Italian, about whom he knew nothing. Perhaps he could get somebody to go with them.

"Mr. Allison has been telling me about the structure up on top," he said slowly. "There is a deep hole of unknown depths inside, and people have fallen down it to their deaths. If you go, promise to be very, very careful."

"Oh uncle, don't worry. We won't do any more than peek inside."

"All right, I won't object, but please look out where you step. Starting now?"

"No, not till after lunch."

WHEN she left them, her uncle sighed. "I suppose it's asinine of me, because she will take care of herself, but I don't like the idea."

"I don't either," Allison acquiesced gravely.

"What kind of a chap is this young Count my niece is with? I must admit I'm curious."

"Oh he's harmless," the Englishman laughed. "Been around the hotel for several weeks now. I rather imagine he wants to get married provided the girl's sufficiently rich for him to keep up the family traditions." He stared over Barton's head.

"The guide wishes to speak to you," he advised quietly. "He's giving me the high sign." Barton looked around. The fellow did look as though he had something to impart. He walked up to the native questioningly.

"A thousand pardons, Monsieur, for interrupting your repast," the latter pleaded, "but I beg of you, do not permit your young niece to accompany the Italian up to the entrance."

"Just what do you mean?" Barton asked sternly. "Did you eavesdrop on our conversation?"

"Monsieur," the guide was not offended, "My overhearing was an accident. Please pardon what I have to say. You can see that I am no ordinary guide. I have gone to school and traveled in many lands, even your great America, but western knowledge has not spoiled my eastern perceptions. Inhuman creatures that feast on the blood of men sleep by day beneath these ruins. Your niece, she is young. It will not do for them to get her."

Barton nodded appreciatively. "I believe that your warning was well meant. I do not want my niece to go up there alone. I would go with her, but the climb is too much for me, so I am asking you to go instead."

The native cringed and gazed apprehensively upward.

"I am willing to do anything you say, Monsieur, but I beg of you, I could not do that."

"You are afraid?"

"Any man who claims not to fear the supernatural is either a liar or a fool."

"However you will if I make it worth your while. Ten American dollars?" Barton reached in his pocket and pulled out the bill.

The guide eyed it wistfully. "Monsieur, I would not go up to that place for all the gold in the world ordinarily, but my little boy is ill. The doctor says that if he does not go to a hospital right away he will die. With this money, I will have enough for him."

"Do so, and I will make it fifteen," Barton smiled generously, as he reseated himself at his table.

The party gathered around to watch Susan, the Count, and the guide start up. Worn narrow steps formed their only path. Hands as well as feet had to be used as a means of propelling one's self.

Up they climbed. They were visible until with a wave they were lost from sight over the edge. An interval of anxious waiting followed. The native waiters on the tables stood apprehensively about shaking their heads. Their ideas on the matter were clear. Ten minutes passed. "It's about time they were coming down," Barton thought. "Nothing can be around the building to see that they haven't looked over by now."

Suddenly the silence was broken by a series of shrill screams and hoarse shouts. The sounds had a horrible quality which chilled the blood. It made one feel that those emitting them were seeing things unspeakable.

The guide came sliding down. His clothes were torn and stained with blood from deep scratches. All his European mannerisms had been washed away in a flood of fear. He lay muttering in his own tongue, Allison catching the words that the two explorers were "Lost—lost. . . ."

Any attempts to cajole another native into accompanying Barton on a search of the ruins would have been futile since most of them had departed. No one else in the immediate party was capable of making the climb, and as the guide could not be persuaded to give a coherent story of what had happened, Barton struggled up the steep incline himself. Allison had generously swung up behind him.

Both the elderly gentlemen were exhausted at the end of their climb. But they did not stop. If the pyramid had seemed sinister from a distance, it fairly chilled one standing on the summit beside it. The surrounding country spread out before one's gaze. The city and its inhabitants might have been a million miles away. The hill top had a weird unreal atmosphere all its own.

The two men were not unaffected by the feeling that pervaded the spot, but they did not permit it to deter them. Both rushed around the building treading on the dark unwholesome vegetation which emitted a most repulsive odor. For all the evidence here, no one had visited the spot in a thousand years.

Futile Efforts

"OBVIOUSLY nothing is out here," exclaimed Allison impatiently. "Let's look in. We'd better be careful. We don't know what we could fall into." They went to the entrance and looked within. Something seemed to be scurrying to cover in a dark corner. The flapping of broad wings was suggested, but no movement was discernible. A feeble light illuminated the interior.

The floor looked solid enough, so Barton and Allison stepped in. Immediately, the suggestion of sound came again, but nothing that might have been responsible for it was in sight.

Allison's description of this place was verified in one essential. A hole yawned in the exact center, and it seemed to contain the very essence of blackness. The searchers passed over to peer into the depths. Again the faint rustle. This time, two fiery red eyes peered at them from a corner only to disappear immediately. Barton alone saw them, but laid it to his imagination and made no mention to his companion.

"My God," he managed to gasp. "Do you think they fell down here? My niece is all I have. I can't bear it." He broke down completely.

"Steady," Allison admonished sympathetically. "We have to get back, man, and secure help."

Barton steadied himself and allowed his new friend to lead him out. They lowered themselves down carefully. Allison spoke to Mrs. Crompton, "I am sorry that this interruption has occurred, but we will have to dash off to get help. A terrible accident has just happened to the Italian and Mr. Barton's niece. Could we take one of the cars?" Mrs. Crompton hysterically agreed.

The guide who had recovered something of his poise, offered to drive the car for them to the nearest native police station. On the way Barton sat hunched up in the seat. He had been stricken mute by his loss.

Allison took the initiative by paying the man his fifteen dollars and requesting him to give a coherent account of what had happened.

"Monsieur," he began, "it all came about as I had expected. The young lady and her escort walked about outside admiring the view. Finally the Count suggested finding out what was inside. She demurred, but he pleaded until she agreed. I stood at the door watching. They passed over to look down the vast hole.

"Messieurs, that place is the entrance to purgatory. Without warning it vomited forth its hideous denizens. The girl and her escort were seized by talons each of which must have been possessed of the strength of twenty men. They were borne downward. The creatures tried to take me too, but as I was near the entrance, I escaped the claws. The beasts will not emerge into the daylight."

"Are you certain that you saw correctly?" Allison persisted. "Might not a portion of the floor have given way and you imagined the rest?"

"I swear to all I have stated," said the guide sincerely.

The car drew up before a new modern building contrasting sharply with the older more picturesque surrounding structures. Barton roused from his stupor got out, Allison accompanying him. He paused motioning to the driver. "You had better come along. Your statements may be required."

The Englishman made clear the details to the native official who listened until the end. The latter then spoke. "My sympathy goes to both of you especially the gentleman who has lost his young niece. But I fear that nothing can be done."

"What do you mean?" shouted Barton. "Why they may be down at the bottom there suffering agonies."

"Monsieur, pray be calm," requested the official quietly. "No one can fall down that hole and live. The truth is, my men are a little afraid of the place. I doubt very much whether I could prevail upon any of them to go down to bring up the bodies. The risk of a cave-in would be too great."

"Poppycock," Barton stormed. "The hole has never fallen in yet. It's not likely to happen now. I'll put my case before an authority who doesn't fear his own shadow. This isn't the last you will hear of this matter, sir." He stamped out angrily leaving the official shrugging his shoulders.

"What do you plan to do?" Allison queried helplessly.

"I will go to the American Consul. Maybe he can do something. Such inaction is inhuman."

"An excellent idea," enthused the Englishman. "Here guide, drive us to the American Consul's residence."

That individual fortunately was found at home. He proved sympathetic and immediately got in touch with a high French authority.

After much conversation, he hung up the receiver and announced triumphantly, "I've fixed things for you, so you needn't worry any longer.

"A car will be around in a few minutes. In it there will be three native police and a seventy-foot rope ladder. You will proceed to the ruins. The police shall descend the hole and bring up the man and girl. I sincerely hope," he turned to Mr. Barton, "that your niece is not as badly off as might be supposed."

THE machine came as promised. Barton was more alert, tensed and eager. He seemed to have been cheered. But the faces of the natives were stolid. If they felt nervous, they did not show it.

Sunset only two hours off, the ruins were absolutely deserted. No native ever went there near that hour. The little tables were all turned on end, the proprietors having gone with the others. The police began to converse and exchange affrighted glances after stopping at the base of the hill.

"We had best start up right away before these blighters begin to show the white feather in earnest," Allison whispered. The natives helped the elderly gentlemen up the last steep climb and all five entered the pyramid. Once more came the faint rustle in a dark corner but nothing

emerged. The rope ladder was lowered for thirty feet before getting any slack. One of the natives started out to tie it around a stone.

The Englishman had a small flashlight which the consul had kindly given him. He flashed it on a corner and revealed there suddenly was a singularly repulsive creature. It looked like a giant bat, but in many respects, it differed from one. It appeared longer, while the watchers felt as though it had an uncanny intelligence.

Only for a second, did the light play upon the corner. Allison's attention was distracted by the fleeing natives who had seen too. Instantly a dim shape flew over to the hole dropping into it.

A dull roar came up from below. The Englishman, white faced, grasped his friend to pull him roughly out into the open.

"That devil I disturbed went to bring up his companions," he muttered. "Let's get down from here."

For the second time that day, the two descended the hill. The natives had taken the car, and the only alternative for the two men was to walk back to the town. Inside the city, a cab was hired to convey them back to the consul's home. He was absent, and they had to wait a half hour before he returned. The tale was related at that time.

The Consul shook his head at the finish, "You must remember that those fellows with you are easily startled by little events. Bats are often found around old dark deserted places. The large one whose slumbers you interrupted looked much bigger in the semi-gloom than he probably was. However, we will try again." He jiggered the phone and began to speak in French after getting his party. He seemed to become more and more worried as the conversation progressed. He hung up the receiver despairingly at the end.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen, but your native friends evidently have cooked things for us nicely. The official with whom I just conversed tells me that they returned an hour ago saying that the ruins caved-in as they started down. A very plausible fabrication of lies. So much in fact that it was accepted without a doubt. I have been assured that any further attempts to descend into the ruins will not be sanctioned because of their evident foolhardiness." Little more could be said and the two friends departed.

A council of war was held that night in Barton's room.

Allison was speaking, "The question to be decided first is whether or not your niece and the Italian fell down the hole or were carried down. Now don't accuse me of bringing my rather fantastic theories to bear on the case just because they appear to be related to one another. We possess certain evidence that we cannot overlook. I will group it for your benefit.

"1. Some credence must be allowed to the tales of intelligent observers around the ruins in the past.

"2. The tale of the native guide today.

"3. Peculiarities which I just recollected concerning the last screams of your niece and the Count. They seemed to fade away gradually. In case of a fall, there would have been time for only one, not a series of cries.

"4. Why they should have fallen down the hole when it was in plain sight before their eyes?

"5. The similarity of the guide's tale and that of the young American whose companions died in 1910.

"6. The strong possibility that the creature we saw today was a guard stationed there. We went in too quickly for it to get down the hole and warn his comrades both times."

"Your arguments are convincing," nodded Barton, who had aged ten years. "I should hate to think of her in the clutches of those monsters." He recoiled shuddering.

Into the Depths

"I DON'T wish to be so brutally frank," Allison apologized, "but I think that she would be better off in that event, for we would have a chance of saving her. If they are alive, these creatures probably have her down there in some cave. We have every reason to believe that the bate feast on blood, preferably that of humans. They are intelligent, however, and only take a little from their victims at a time so that recuperation of the victim will be possible until the next blood letting. That is the method of the vampire bats of Central and South America. Shall we consider them alive and merely waiting to be rescued?"

"I am willing to do so," Barton agreed, "although I cannot help but fear we are on the wrong track. Granted that you and I look upon the matter in the same light, what course of procedure to pursue? It is to be conceded that they are an entirely unfamiliar type of animal in modern times, and we can only guess at their characteristics, although it is foolish to suppose that they are supernatural. We are too old to be physically fitted to make an attack on the stronghold of these creatures. If there was only a younger man to help us. I don't see how the services of anyone here could be enlisted in such a fantastic adventure."

A knock was heard on the door. Barton answered and before him stood the young man he had wanted Susan to meet, Ralph Stanley.

The latter was saying, "I'm sorry to break in on you at such a time, but I have heard of your misfortune and want to help if possible."

Barton quietly motioned the visitor to a seat. "You have come at a most opportune moment," he said. Carefully he looked the young person over noting his strength, his candid open face indicating honesty and sincerity.

Then he gave the details omitting nothing. Stanley was incredulous but stuck to his resolution. A bond seemed to grow between the three comparative strangers.

Talking it over a definite plan of action was suggested. "We have to purchase three .45 automatics," stated Allison, "along with ammunition. Mr. Barton tells me that he is not very adept in using firearms. I am pretty fair at it myself. How about you?"

"I was on the rifle team in college," Ralph

answered. "That was several years ago though. It's hard to say what I could do today especially with a revolver."

"No need to worry. I expect that if anything has to be shot at you will be close enough to do the job accurately. I suggest that we arm ourselves and move out to the ruins late tomorrow afternoon. At that time no troublesome persons will be encountered to ask questions. We will climb up to the top once more. By the way, our little adventures along that line have made me feel quite athletic.

"Once there we will make use of the rope ladder our native friends did not take with them on the occasion of their last visit. Then we have long burning flashlights for each to aid in exploring the depths below. If your niece and the Italian are there, Mr. Barton, we will get them if it is necessary to kill every damn' brute in the place."

Ralph wondered whether he had gone out of his mind as he left the two older men that night. Why had he offered to participate in such an affair? There was but one answer, the girl. Funny that he should feel this way about her. She had never yet spoken to him. He had seen her around the hotel with the Italian and she had seemed wrapped up in him.

Stanley thought ruefully that enough adventure should have come his way hunting big game in the Sudan. Now something was compelling him to venture down into the corridors of some ruins in search of a girl and man, mainly for the girl, whom he had never seen previous to a few days ago.

The ensuing hours passed slowly for all, but the time to start came at last. Ralph bucked up in determination. The trip out was made in a cab and after a slight pause at the hill's base, they began the climb, the two older men being helped along by the younger. Two of the group felt as though they were embarking upon something unreal, acting a meaningless part, Allison alone being impressed with the reality of the menace they faced.

The sentry must not be given a chance to take alarm and dive down to warn the sleeping hordes, he realized. The pyramid was approached quietly from the side. All three dashed suddenly in at the same time flashing the piercing rays of light into the corners.

Ralph unearthed the bat-guard, pressed back as far as possible into a crack in the wall. His eyes gleamed wickedly under the penetrating beam but he started for the hole with a rustle of black wings. Stanley's pistol spoke sharply. The thing flapped wildly and fell, but into the hole.

"I'm certain I hit him," Ralph enthused.

"I hope so," Barton said gravely. "If he just fell to the bottom of this shaft, we mayn't have disturbed any of the creatures."

The rope ladder lay untouched. Barton and Ralph were to descend leaving the Englishman on guard. Barton wished to be on hand when Susan was found, while Ralph was needed in case of an encounter. Allison was to cover their retreat upward with a gun.

EXPERIENCING the sensation of descending into nothingness, Barton stepped onto the first rung of the ladder, the younger man right above him. His were the sharper eyes, so his position was an advantage in scanning the depths. His weapon was in the hand that clasped the supporting rung, the flashlight in the other. Time after time, he sent the beam exploring the darkness, but it revealed no living thing.

"How far down have we to go?" he asked hoarsely.

"It took thirty feet of rope ladder to reach the bottom before. I wish we would get somewhere soon. These plagued bugs are crawling all over my face." The walls were alive with loathsome vermin. Ralph suppressed an urge to cry out when an unpleasant form slithered across the back of his neck.

He looked above. He saw Allison's light but was unable to distinguish the Englishman. Again he flashed his own beam downward. This time it uncovered a mass of green slime shimmering in the circle of radiance.

"Do you see that?" he called. "How deep do you suppose it is?"

"I'll see," Barton replied. "It is not so bad. It comes up to my knees, no further."

In another moment Ralph was by his side. "It is pretty squashy," he said. "The stuff's running down into my shoes. I don't see anything of the bird I shot down just now." A horrible suspicion flashed to his mind. He immediately forgot it in the other man's cry. He followed his hypnotized stare and shouted also. There in a black corridor leading away to the caves probably, were eyes, red flaming eyes.

No bodies were seen, just eyes, hundreds of them crowding about and away as far as could be seen. The urge to flee was all powerful. Stanley's brain told him that these were creatures of the supernatural. Suddenly he remembered why he was down at the bottom of that hellish hole. He must not fail now.

He boldly flashed the light straight at the objects of his fears. His fears had been idiotic. The black bodies were visible now, and from them came a sickening sweet odor. They scurried back away from the blinding whiteness which tortured their unaccustomed gaze. Ralph raised his .45 and fired to experience the satisfaction of seeing one of the eyes go out. He would have done it once more, but the old man grasped his arm.

"Save your ammunition," he warned tersely.

"Where do we go from here?" Ralph laughed nervously. "I frankly don't think that it is advisible to try to get through armed with only automatics."

"Those devils would have us torn to pieces before taking ten steps. Let's start back up." During their excitement, the two had been unaware to Allison's faint shouts as to whether they were all right.

Ralph shouted back, "Get ready to cover our retreat. We're coming back up." They might have reached safety if Barton had not suffered a fall. The old gentleman slipped on the slimy stone floor, and his knees buckled beneath him. He went down completely submerged in the put-

rid water. Stanley hastened down to help him up.

The bats at once sensed that the invaders were inconvenienced and chose that moment to make a strategic move. Eight of them flew forward.

Ralph was forced to drop Mr. Barton to fire. Trying to aim was out of question. He just shot into the passage making a hit every time. However, some creatures got by. Surprisingly they didn't stop to give battle. Instead they flew up with evident purpose to the top of the well.

The sounds of shots floated down. A flashlight struck Ralph on the shoulder. Four of the beasts had gotten past, one fluttered back down wounded.

Stanley again picked up the old man after ascertaining that no more were coming. The latter sputtered vigorously while he wiped the green slime away from the face with his handkerchief.

"I have drunk about two quarts of the foul liquid," he growled savagely. "What happened?"

When Ralph had told him, he exclaimed, "I hope that they haven't injured Allison. Has he called down lately?" Ralph replied in the negative. They both shouted upward, but there was no response. And in the dark corridors questioning eyes, hundreds of them, watched and waited. . . .

"I think that we had better stick to our purpose of starting up," Barton announced decisively. No sooner had he spoke than the rope ladder fell at his feet.

"Looks as though I should have crossed my fingers," he declared ruefully. Suddenly his eyes gleamed with intelligence. "I have it. Do you know why those bats flew past you." Stanley had to admit that he did not. "They wanted to cut off our retreat. At the top of the shaft, they overcame Allison before he could get them all with his gun. They next proceeded outside regardless of the fact that the sun hasn't set and loosened the rope from the rock around which it had been hung."

"We Are Saved!"

"I WONDER if Mr. Allison went to secure help," Stanley muttered.

"Nothing remains but to wait," the other advised. "The authorities are reluctant to investigate disasters occurring under the shadow of these ruins. We have discovered that in the past. Let's hope that an exception is made in this case."

"These fellows haven't come any closer," Ralph announced, flashing his torch in the direction of the silent hordes. "I don't expect to be bothered by the ones at the top. They have a healthy respect for guns."

Ralph had forgotten a momentary suspicion in the rapid passage of events. Now it returned to be rejected. No such fears were worth considering. Their feet had tread about all over the slime covered floor. It wasn't possible.

"Say, we have forgotten something,'" he said suddenly. "Didn't one of the brutes fall just now?"

"That's right," Barton observed. "I wonder where he has gone."

They found it floating against the wall badly hit. It had not died. The hate in its eyes bore witness to that truth. Ralph moved closer to make an inspection. The thing made a weak but effective jab which tore his pants leg across the front. He contended himself with making his observations from a more discreet position.

The creature was a member of a bat species. However, it could hardly be termed a scion of a lowly race. The skull showed a startingly tremendous possibility for brain capacity. The eyes were proportionally huge and luminously red with tiny horizontal black slits for pupils. The head was mounted over a big bulging chest. Muscular claws protruded from it, while the wings grew down the back. The rest of the body tapered away. It was here that the blood sacs were situated. When the creature's mouth drew back, two sharp hollow teeth, long, curved, and set in front were revealed. Blood, his only diet, was sucked through them after being inserted in the victim's neck.

Satisfied as to the kind of thing he had to deal with, Ralph turned to Barton. "Think I had best put a bullet into him," he suggested. He took up the .45. Somehow the hand holding the gun shook, and the shot entered the lower extremities, not the eye, as had been intended. Drenching blood spewed forth carrying with it the repulsive odor which all the bats left around their immediate vicinity.

"That fellow has feasted well lately," Barton remarked bitterly, his face twisted in revulsion. "Some poor native or animal gave up the blood, furnishing the meal." Another shot was necessary to kill.

"Legend has it that these birds are hard to exterminate," said Ralph with a smile. "I believe it now. Imagine driving a wooden stake into the heart of one of them and then cutting off the head to stuff the mouth with garlic when they smell bad as they do. Not a job I would care to tackle. Those superstitions were funny. These creatures are perfectly natural, but they are evidently of an unknown race."

But soon the man had nothing to divert them. They stood, it seemed, for hours in the slime leaning when weariness made support absolutely necessary, against the vermin-covered wall. Ralph knew that he would go mad if help did not come soon. He became so weakened that often he would slump into a sitting posture.

If he faltered now the vampires would come on him before he was entirely dead. A pair of hateful orbs would stare into his own, while the two teeth would sink into his throat to slowly suck away the blood of life. Mr. Barton was beginning to babble incoherently to himself. He too was going mad.

SHARP reports came suddenly from above. A black body hurtling past, spurting blood. Allison's voice came down asking whether they were all dead and stating that help had come. Ralph reassured him and then clutched the old man. "Do you hear? We're saved." Barton looked back dumbly scarcely appreciating their good fortune. A new rope ladder brushed their heads. Ralph realized that the old man was in

a far too exhausted state to make the climb, so he motioned him to step on the first rung.

He tied Barton securely and called, "Pull up!" A few minutes longer to wait, and the ladder was there for him. Would the bats get him at the last moment? He strained his tired muscles to pull his body up rung after rung. The glow of the electric torches was visible. The creatures had come out into the bottom of the pit. Well let them. He was halfway up.

Suddenly they started for him. He stopped to fire and was unable to pull the trigger.

"Continue, Monsieur!" came a voice in English. "We will care for the devils." Simultaneously the men at the top started to shoot. Stanley did not pause again to look back. He climbed madly until he lay on the floor with a French soldier forcing liquor out of a flask into his throat.

A squad of French soldiers raked the hole with their rifles. The corporal signaled them to cease firing. "They have retired," he announced brusquely in his native tongue. Feeling a little dizzy, young Stanley stood up. The upper structure looked actually cozy and inviting after the experiences below. Blood stains and grotesque bodies covered the floor. Barton had fainted but was recovering.

Allison came over, his face in bandages. "It looked like we arrived just in time," he greeted. "Poor old Barton is in a bad way judging from appearances. Tell me just what happened." Ralph did so. He then asked the Englishman to give his story.

"I could see you going down until you got beyond the range of my beam," the Englishman began. "Afterwards I could still hear the murmur of your conversation. I heard a shout next and knew that you had found something. Then came the report of your revolver.

"I shouted several times before getting results. The request to cover your retreat put me on guard. It seemed as though you were taking a long spell in getting in view. Then the bats came. I got two, but they fluttered to the floor up here. The others were too much for me. My light was knocked from my grasp along with my weapon.

"There must be some basis to the idea that these creatures have considerable strength. They took me by grabbing hold of my clothes. I was pulled towards the edge. The object was to throw me down and crush me by the fall. I managed to jerk away at the last minute, to my own good fortune and yours, since I should have probably landed on either one or the other of your heads in descending. They didn't follow me more than a couple of yards from the pyramid. But it was outside that I perceived them doing a remarkable thing.

"They grasped the rope ladder where the last rung was thrown over a big rock and pulled it loose with their claws. It was carried inside to be dropped, I suppose from your narrative, down the hole.

"I was scratched, but my injuries were fortunate because I could rely upon them to furnish proof as to the tale I bore. They were on my face.

"On getting to the city, I went directly to our friend, the American Consul. He drove me in his car without delay to the French authorities. The same old reluctance was shown at first. Then I exhibited my scratches and pointed out that I had scarcely slid down the hill on my nose.

"Everyone became at once solicitous. A squad of soldiers was immediately detailed to come to the rescue. The Consul and the French authorities wait below in a car now. For my part, I was unable to resist coming up again."

Barton had recovered and was standing unsupported. The French corporal looked around expectantly for orders.

Ralph took the initiative. "Mr. Allison, I think that it would be advisable for you to accompany Mr. Barton down to the car. You hadn't better try to come down with us."

Turning to the corporal, "Have you a portable machine gun with you?"

"Yes, Monsieur, it was thought advisable to bring one."

Adequately armed the rescuers started into the blackness, Ralph leading the way. The soldiers were quite nervous, but they did not hold back. The bottom was now choked with blood and bodies. The two men who had been left on top flashed their lights. The bats were still there, waiting in the corridor as before.

The Battle In the Corridor

"WE must take care not to destroy those for whom we search," spoke the corporal in words of warning to his men. "Crouch low when firing so that the pellets of lead may strike the ceiling after piercing their victims."

An ear shattering burst came from the machine gun. The havoc it worked was evident from the number of eyes that went out.

The squad advanced over the bodies. The tunnel led upward a bit until it was clear of slime, and then led to the right. The eyes retreated uniformly before them.

The attack came at the next turn. A repulsive mass of flying black monstrosities choked the passage. The machine gun sent out a steady stream of lead. The bats squirted blood and fell in heaps. Two or three contrived to get by unharmed to inflict deep scratches on the invaders, but the pistols picked them off.

The creatures could not stand such punishment. Their compact ranks broke and fled. The corridor was soon innocent of any except the dead and badly wounded.

Everyone shuddered when passing over the gruesome pile, but there was no decrease in vigilance. Finally the last turn was reached and an unexpected sight revealed. Here was a huge room with floors and walls of polished marble. The ceiling rose into a beautiful dome which reflected many pleasant glows under the lights of the torches. Numerous excellently carved friezes decorated the bareness. All other superfluous objects seemed to have been removed at some date long before the bats came. On the opposite side, was the evenly fashioned entrance to another tunnel.

The searchers had stood gasping at the jewel-

like completeness of the place. Sight of the last of the bats disappearing into the other tunnel galvanized them into action.

Stanley, however, was staring transfixed with horror at a sight which the soldiers had overlooked. Two white bodies clad in rags lay flat on their backs against the wall several feet from each other. One of the bodies was male and the other unmistakably feminine. The color of the first was of a ghastly whiteness. A bloated black shape almost bursting with blood flopped futilely about on the floor. Another rested on the chest of the girl with its sharp teeth at her throat.

Ralph went insane with fury. He startled the others with an inhuman cry. His main object in life then was to tear to bits with his own bare hands the creature sucking the life blood from Susan, for it was her whom he recognized.

The bat did not seem to notice the man before he was grasped by a fold of flesh. His eyes glowed with rage at the interruption. Was it not a recognized law that the woman was his property, because she had his poison in her veins?

He flashed about to vent his rage on the offending brother. Ah, a puny man creature who dared do this to him, the king of the bat colony.

Ralph could not use his gun, had not thought to. The thing knocked him down with his powerful claws and began to slash. A deep cut appeared across Stanley's back with the first swoop. No, these were no beings to attack single handed.

The butt of a rifle in the hands of a soldier saved Ralph from further mistreatment. The creature was stunned but did not lose possession of its wits. It flew after its fellows, escaping the shots directed after it.

The corporal was leaning over the girl and listening for heart beats. "Mademoiselle still lives. Yet her pulse is very weak indeed," he said. "Now let us look at this one." He felt of the Italian's pulse. "No, he is quite dead." His attention was caught by the well fed bat nearby. "There lies in him the poor man's life blood."

A great crackling sound terminated his speech. Out of the dome, fell a great block leaving an empty spot in the beauty of it. Again came the sound with a crack appearing in the wall.

Stanley ran forward and slung Susan to his shoulder. "We have got to get out of here quickly," he said tersely. "The vibration of the shots has disturbed the masonry, and we may be ground flat in case of a cave-in."

The soldiers were not slow to take warning. They all scrambled into the corridor, every man for himself. No one remembered the body of the Count.

Halfway to the bottom of the hole, the man at the rear shouted shrilly, "Mother of God, fall on your faces all." The call was so urgent that everyone obeyed automatically. A dull roar increased in volume and was about them. A vast bat horde swept by in the panic. Ralph realized at the sight that they had had only a small fraction of the true numbers to contend. The main body had been far below beyond the marble room. Pressed flat against the floor out of reach of the talons, no danger threatened. Stanley protected Susan with his own body. His heart was grieved at the sight of her so white and lifeless in his arms.

IT seemed as though the air would never cease to be free of the flying hordes. The main mass got by finally. A few scattered groups continued to pass. Everyone knew that the beating wings had added to the threat of a complete cave-in. The walls were cracked and the corridor floor covered with fallen debris. An exceptionally heavy chunk had crushed one soldier's head as he lay. A companion picked him up.

Prayers of thanks were given up at the base of the hole when the rope ladder was found unmolested. A burly soldier relieved Ralph of his precious burden.

The last man got to the upper floor and as he ran for the opening, the pyramid crumpled. It had dissolved into a deep pit immediately behind him.

His companions who had been gazing fascinatedly at the sky turned. Evidently the scene of destruction was not sufficiently exciting to divert them, for they suffered it only one single glance before returning their eyes to the orginal object of attention. It was just before sunset, and the heavens were smeared with a great flock of giant birds. But when one looked at them closely, it could easily be seen that no birds were there but immense five-foot bats careening wildly around in confused circles.

The skies had been darkened at sunset in the same manner hundreds of years ago by the ancestors of these creatures. Now the present generation was homeless. A single bat considerably larger than his fellow soared majestically away from the confused tangle. As though a signal had been uttered, order emerged from chaos. The big bat headed away straight as a die for the open country, all others following him in orderly fashion.

The rescuers filed wearily down to the plain. The sinister glamour was gone somehow forever from the now ruined temple. The corporal and his men were praised for their excellent and valorous work by the officials in the car.

Barton's joy at recovering his niece was unparalleled. She was removed to a hospital. There the doctor assigned to the case declared her chances of recovery slight unless a blood transfusion was made without delay. Ralph volunteered at once to undergo the necessary operation on the behalf of the girl, and because it was necessary to take a good deal of his life fluid, he remained in a cot at the hospital for the night under careful observation. Barton would have remained with them but the physician informed him that his niece would scarcely be able to see him within the next twenty-four hours, provided she awoke within that interval.

Both the old gentlemen returned to the hotel. The two friends were exhausted, but their minds so excited by the events of the day that they began to talk about it at once after the evening meal. They went to the quiet of Barton's room.

"It's hard to appreciate the fullness of this day," observed Allison.

"Yes," the other replied, "And we have been

extraordinarily lucky. I'll grant you that." He looked at his watch.

"They promised to call me from the hospital late this evening to tell me how my niece is getting along. I'm not in any fear of her recovery, although I do worry as to whether or not the affair has left any imprint on her mind. It would be frightful for any trouble like that to remain with her. She is only eighteen you know."

"I should not bother myself with any worries on that score," the Englishman spoke confidently. "She probably lay in a stupor all the time while in their power.

"You are not the only one who is pleased tonight, Mr. Barton. The actual proofs of the existence of a race of bats far ahead of their fellows in evolution means a lot to me. I have never told you, but I have spent a good deal of my life in trying to find a remnant of what must have once been a mighty race. All over the world, I have traveled puttering about the districts steeped in superstition unearthing many strange things, never getting the information I wanted."

He looked up almost apologetically. "Do you think it would bore you if I was to give the theoretical history of this bat species."

"On the contrary, the idea pleases me very much," Barton smiled encouragingly.

"It is best to keep in mind that the race of bats is undoubtedly a great deal more ancient than that of man. Way back in the earth's dawn, the smaller animals probably provided the food for these creatures of the dark, meaning the ones of our experience. They would go forth at the setting of the sun to feed and return to their caves at sunrise. Man's blood became popular. Consequently bats were beings to be feared. A place was set aside for them in legend as vampires.

"EARLY man, frightened, crouching on the primeval jungle with only his wits to pit against the mighty fangs of the giant carnivora, was prey of this race of super bats. Attacking as they did in the night, usually when the victim was asleep, the marauders rarely ever met opposition. The animal or human whose blood was sucked from him by the vampire bats of Central or South America never awakened during the procedure for the creature injected a sleeping poison into the system."

"Imagine man's chagrin when he began to advance in civilization. The puny and easily frightened creature could now fight back with the weapons he had devised. We know that the higher bats were intelligent in many ways. Physical characteristics had prevented them from progressing in the same manner as man, so they were at a deplorable disadvantage under the new conditions of man around the Mediterranean."

Here the phone began to jingle, and Barton answered it. His expression lit up.

"My little girl is getting some color into her cheeks," he said. "She has also fallen into a deep and normal sleep which will have refreshed her upon awaking. The doctor says that he thinks we will be able to bring her here in the morning. Ralph also seems to be getting along nicely. Well now that I have got the good news off my chest, you may continue."

"To the marauders' delight, the dark ages of man descended. We have evidence that they were pretty active during that period. But the Renaissance put an end to their activities for the second time. Thousands upon thousands of giant bats were hunted down and slain in their haunts in ruined castles. Many others starved for lack of ability to find nourishment. Anyway we know that something happened to make them almost extinct. Perhaps they were not immune to the Black Death. You remember from history what a hole that episode made in the population of Europe.

"But this bat race is a reasoning race. Even at this last hour, some saved themselves. We have every reason to believe that the ancestors of the bat colony here in Algiers came at about the time of Europe's reawakening. Their migration was a last resort. And now today they have been driven from their ancient home."

"Do you suppose that this is the single surviving remnant of the race?" Barton mused.

"It does not seem credible. Perhaps now that we have lifted the veil about many mistaken beliefs, there will not be so much hesitation over hunting down the beasts in other places. I am wondering what is going to happen to them."

"Well you know that the troops are out hunting the brutes down with orders to shoot on sight," said Barton. "I doubt that they stand a great chance of continued peace and prosperity. A few will get away, of course, but in the present state of confusion, most will be good for little else other than zoological or museum specimens."

Barton's statements were correct. The whole countryside turned out in the hunt with a vengeance. Fear was no more. Natives were injured on occasions when the hunted turned on those who tried to exterminate them. By morning it was estimated that half of the bats had been called. Great numbers were killed during the next two weeks, but the most canny selected clever hideouts which were difficult to unearth.

Susan's doctor kept his promise. Early the next morning she was allowed to come to the hotel. She was still very weak and quite unaware of what went on about her. She remembered her experience only as a dim and horrible dream. Her mind fortunately was unaffected. Susan would not be fit for the trip home for several weeks. At first she was sunk in lethargy. Blood tests revealed the presence of a subtle poison injected by the bat to deaden his victim's senses. But this state was not deemed dangerous and the doctor assured Barton that the effect would wear off slowly.

Allison was busy excavating in the ruins and Barton, too, had also become interested in this work.

Young Stanley's desire to meet Susan had been satisfied in an unexpected novel way. Of course she felt an intense gratitude for the part he had played in her rescue. But as time went on, she began to feel a more compelling emotion and the period of Susan's convalescense offered alluring opportunities for this budding romance.

THE END

The Inverted World

(*Continued from Page* 399)

ray resulting from this affinity is known and controlled, so that its effect upon human vision is a known fact, then—and then only—will you have a scientific proof of the phenomenon which it was Lambert's fortune to experience."

For a moment I sat silent, thinking of what George had said, and not knowing what to say in return. He had succeeded in shattering my skeptical view of Lambert's story, and I regretted my hasty doubts about its truth.

"By the way," George continued, "for Lambert's sake, if I were you, I would neither mention a word of this to anyone, nor would I ever write a word about it until experiments with the buorlitite, which I mentioned as necessary to establish the proofs we want, are successfully concluded. Otherwise people will think you gullible, and Lambert will be the laughing-stock of the world."

"Yes, please don't print a word of this," said Lambert. I gave them both my promise.

However, as the days went by, I found the experiences of Lambert haunting me like an obsession. I knew that I could get no release unless I wrote them down on paper. It is only after I write a story that has absorbed me that I am finally able to put in from my mind.

So this is the story. I have kept my promise to my friend, George, and also to Lambert, by changing their names, as well as that of the meteoric fragment, which I have gratuitously called buorlitite.

THE END

The Avenging Ray

(*Continued from Page* 391)

Jules studied the tip of his cigar. "Never again!"

"I should think," said Officer Connolly thoughtfully, "that if you wanted to do it, you could make 'em smaller instead of bigger. It oughta be just as much fun, and it sure would be less trouble!"

This remark was generally appreciated.

"Well, with or without his trucks, Dr. Jules may as well realize right now that he is a national hero!" said Matthews.

To his unending wonder, this fact had been impressed upon Dr. Jules all during the past week. Now there passed in his mind, with the unreality of dreams, pictures of the cheering crowds, the congratulatory newspaper editorials, the messages of praise from all quarters. . . .

When he spoke, his voice was very husky.

"It is a strange, strange paradox that I, who caused all the trouble, should be thanked this way. . . . Humanity is wonderfully forgiving!"

THE END

FOR THE JUNE ISSUE OF WONDER STORIES

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is a new and young writer—one of those whom we delight in encouraging. We are proud to offer this story which we believe is worthy of a mature and experienced writer In

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you see the civilization of the future; a fight against intruders from "outside"; the heroism of two men; the anguish of a third; the despair of a world upon whom the darkness fell—all blended into a short but terrifically gripping story. Mr. Kelly is a comer!

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"Utopia Island"

the latest masterly novel of Otfrid Von Hanstein, peerless German author. The first installment has been but an introduction to the strange island of scientific wonders, where dreams come true. Now we come to the smashing finish in which all the hates of the envious, the greedy and the destroyers are massed against our little colony. The action here rises steadily to a breathless finish, that may, we are afraid, leave you exhausted.

AND OTHERS IN THE JUNE 1931 WONDER STORIES
ON ALL NEWSSTANDS MAY 1

THE READER SPEAKS

In WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY only letters that refer to stories published in the QUARTERLY will be printed

Was Mentally Unbalanced

Editor, Wonder Stories Quarterly:

I am a regular purchaser of WONDER STORIES and the WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY, which have been much appreciated, with the exception of the story of "The Scarlet Planet", which in my judgment should not have been accepted for publication.

One's impression of the article would be that the writer was mentally unbalanced on the sexual question. It savors of cheapness and commonness.

If the writer were of a proper mentality, it would seem impossible for him to create characters who would be constantly reverting to the subject. I sincerely hope it will be the last of its type to appear.

However, I am not writing you for the purpose of expressing my opinion of this particular story. That's merely incidental. The real purpose of this letter is to inquire whether or not your Air Wonder magazine is still being published, or if all tales of that character have been merged by you in WONDER STORIES and WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY. I have not been able to buy Air Wonder Stories in Detroit for some months. In order not to miss numbers, I am inclined to subscribe for your various magazines by the year.

H. M. Wallace,
2015 Book Building,
Detroit, Mich.

(Mr. Wallace's impressions of "The Scarlet Planet" are accepted gratefully. We might say, however, that our author was not elaborating on his own feelings, when he intruded the sexual element into the story. In fact, the spokesman of the author would seem to be the corporal, who deplored the attitude of his comrades in chasing after the women.

Air Wonder Stories is no longer published as a separate magazine, but stories of future aviation appear in either the WONDER STORIES monthly or QUARTERLY. We would be glad to add Mr. Wallace, whom we understand is a prominent Detroit attorney, to our list of subscribers.—*Editor*)

Would Hardly Do Justice

Editor, Wonder Stories Quarterly:

I had been waiting so long for the winter QUARTERLY to come out that when I saw it on the newstand I knocked half the books off scrambling up to get it. They always put it on top.

Eventually I reached home; threw myself on the bed and read 'till I was "read" in the face and suffering from skinned fingers from turning the pages.

Despite the numerous casualties I thoroughly enjoyed the QUARTERLY—until I began "The Scarlet Planet". How did THAT—er—er— (Well, I won't say it) get into your magazine? It would hardly do justice to a sexy magazine. IT WAS POSITIVELY THE LOUSIEST THING YOU EVER TRIED TO MAKE US ENJOY! I am sure I am voicing the opinions of many others as well as six or seven friends of mine. In fact one of these friends is a well-known author of science fiction and he ought to know a bad story when he sees one.

Yes, you most likely thought it was pretty good because you wouldn't have published it if you hadn't. But no matter what you say, to me, and my friends, it was LOUSY, TERRIBLE, AWFUL, DISGRACEFUL, BAD-ERN' BAD, DIZZY, FOOLISH, CLAP-TRAP, and downright L-L-L-LOUSY! It was the worst thing you ever published!

Right from the heart, it was the kind of story I will never recommend to either of my parents when they are seeking reading matter. Nobody would with all its trashy love matters; its silly woman chasers; its foolish slang; and its rambling plot. (I can almost hear you say "we thought it was a very good tale.")

Now, let it be understood that I am perfectly willing to make amends for anything that I have said. I am perfectly willing to apologize to either you or Mr. Lemon but nevertheless that will not change my opinion of "The Scarlet Planet". I sincerely hope that Mr. Lemon will have no bitter feelings towards me because I am sure he can write SWELL stories—if he leaves out the sexy junk. It would be far beyond me to dampen the hopes of any new writer after reading only one of his stories—a very poor thing to judge an author's ability on, indeed. I am quite certain that after Mr. Lemon has written more stories we will all say "The Scarlet Planet" was a good author's worst" (as one of your readers said of Stanton H. Coblents.

Aside from "The Scarlet Planet" the Winter issue was one of the best Quarterlies yet. Everyone of the stories, except—(you know), were MARVELOUS! They were so good that they made up for the "big disappointment". If you only had a story by Ed Earl Repp I could consider it *the* best QUARTERLY.

Jim Nicholson,
40 Lunado Way,
San Francisco, Calif.

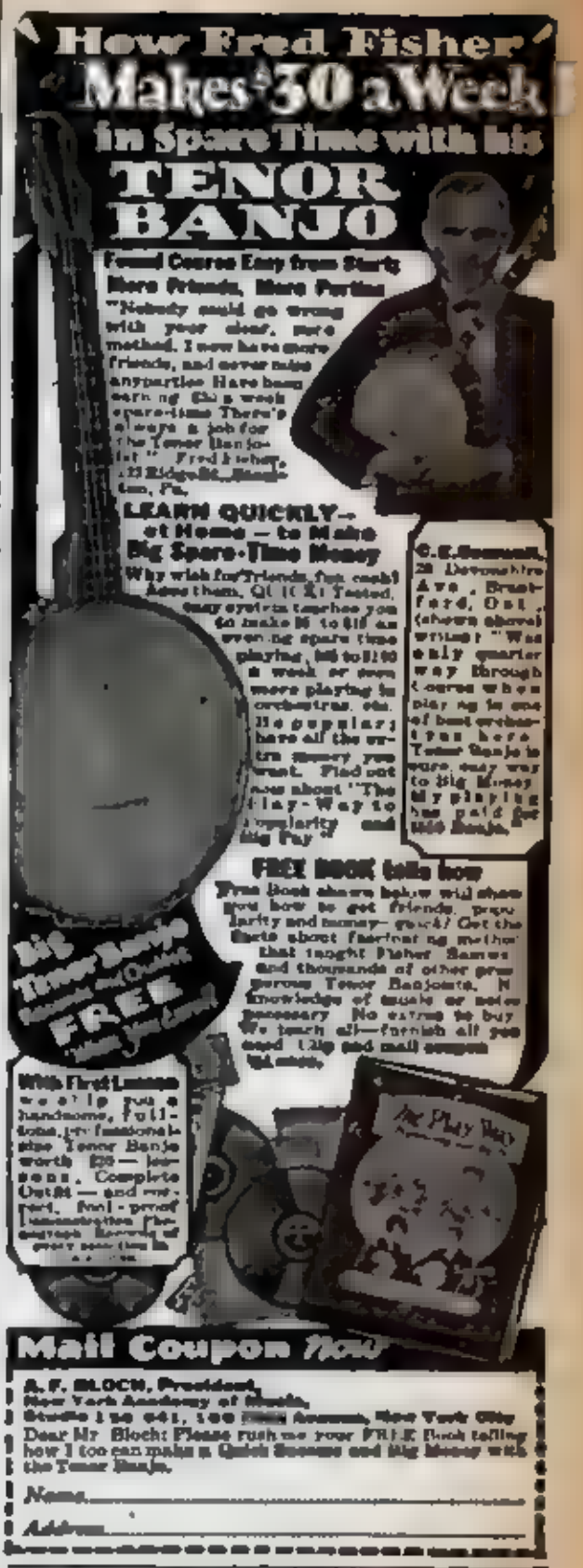
(Since Mr. Nicholson has anticipated us, we will not say about "The Scarlet Planet" that "we thought it was a pretty good tale." Instead we will reminisce and recall the first issue of SCIENCE WONDER STORIES (Wonder Stories is going into its third year now) and the publication of "The Marble Virgin" by Kennie McDowd. Mr. Nicholson's remarks recalls the hot controversy that reigned over "The Marble Virgin" for fully six months. Mr. Nicholson's comments are so emphatic and so completely demolishing that there's no room to get a word in edgewise. So we will keep quiet. Incidentally, we understand that Mr. Lemon has been writing stories for approximately thirty years!—*Editor*)

What Good Would It Be?

Editor, Wonder Stories Quarterly:

Judging by the cover of the Winter number, the Interplanetary issue as it is called, I would say the magazine is the best yet. Is there no end to Paul's imagination? Is there no limit to his artistic ability? Years ago he was a wizard of art and now—! The golden space ship and meteor crashing past it, against the black

(*Continued on page* 430)



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THE READER SPEAKS

(*Continued from page 429*)

background, are indeed an awe-inspiring sight. There is no English word to describe it so I shall have to turn to the French: it is simply *magnifique!*

As for the contents: they too are *magnifique*. I enjoyed "The Scarlet Planet" but do not believe it contains much science. However, the burning air and geometric flood I found to be very ingenious. Paul's illustration of the "no-man" is a scream!

Paul's illustration for "The Scarlet Planet" remind me of those drawn for the "Master Mind of Mars" in the first Annual ever published. Since then the Annual has been made a QUARTERLY and carried to undreamed of heights by its creator, "our" editor: Hugo Gernsback!

Ray Cummings surpasses all former efforts with his "Mark of the Meteor." It is a masterpiece by its sheer study of human nature, let alone the story interest and good science.

George M. Beattie, I. R. Nathanson and A. L. Fierst do their part to make this issue so *superbe*.

What is the next issue going to be: "The Futuristic Number"? I hope so. Narratives of the future are my favorites, excepting those of interplanetary flight. Or perhaps it will be the "4th Dimensional Number" with a story by good old Bob Olsen, master of all fourth dimension writers!

Here's a sort of "Believe it or Not:" S. F. not only stands for San Francisco, the city in which I live, but for Science Fiction, the realm in which I live! And also it stands for Sciencefiction, and the Boys' Sciencefiction Club has been formed here under my presidency. Incidentally: all you boys interested in WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY who would like to join this club and are between 10 and 16, write to me at the address below as we have many copies of "our" magazine in the library.

It would be unusual if I didn't so I'm asking a question: If perpetual motion were discovered, what good would it be? Say for instance that the inventor makes a wheel about the size of a bicycle wheel and mounts it on a stand so that it continually moves and will do so forever. Now what good will this spinning wheel on the stand do? How will it "revolutionize the world"? Thank you.

Forrest J. Ackerman,
530 Staples Avenue,
San Francisco, Calif.

(We print this letter of young Mr. Ackerman, who we understand is a good friend of young Mr. Nicholson. It seems that on the question of "The Scarlet Planet" dissension reigns. Mr. Ackerman defends and Mr. Nicholson denounces that story from the pen of Don Lemon. We hope that the story does not cause any rupture in the relationship between these two stimulating young gentleman.—*Editor*)

Will Names Be Abolished?

Editor, Wonder Stories Quarterly:

I have just finished the Winter 1931 issue of WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY and I am writing to tell you how disappointed I am in it. The first story, "The Scarlet Planet" by Don M. Lemon was not fit to be published in a much cheaper magazine than yours. One continuous theme—women, women, and then for a change a different type of women. Besides finding the literature in the story "punk" I would really like to know how a person can stand such a stream of letters and numbers such as was thrown at me on the first page of "The Scarlet Planet".

The Master Criminal, C-X; the balloting of the Secret 99; Circle 27; 4 X-Olite! How in the world, and why in the world do science fiction authors get the idea that in future generations the having of a name will be abolished.

You called the Winter issue of the QUARTERLY an "Interplanetary Number", yet not all of the stories in the magazine are interplanetary stories—nor is the majority interplanetary.

On comparing the issue just received to a past issue containing "An Atomic Adventure" and "From Earth to Moon", I find that there is little or no comparison. The past issue was twice as good.

Well, now, I will write finis to the brickbats and start throwing a few flowers. I believe that your magazines are the best in the world and I think I can dig up a couple of other fellows to prove it. Once in a while your stories are not so hot, but even those stories are much better than the average run of stories in any other magazine.

K. Hitch,
34 Santa Fe Ave.,
Richmond, Cal.

(Mr. Hitch maintains an even balance between applause and criticism. His comment that the Fall 1930 issue was "twice as good" as the Winter 1931 comes as quite a surprise. From comments we had received the Winter issue was looked upon as one of the best of the Quarterlies.—*Editor*)

Interplanetary "Plot" Contest

(*Continued from page 393*)

which the insects require for world dominion. After the world is freed from its cataleptic sleep, the intrusion of the invaders is placed together by the evidence left behind, and by the bodies of a number of the insects which could not survive the earth's climate and which perished. Earth now makes war on the asteroid insects by means of chemical and bacterial agents. The insects are killed and the earth people get back their radium and platinum and incidentally capture other valuable metals from the asteroid hordes."

This simple plot is by no means a good one; and we are certain that our readers will find much better material—far more detailed and complete, more intricate and far more original.

In order to participate in this contest, we are giving a few simple rules which you must observe

(1) You are to submit a plot for an interplanetary story

(2) The outline of the plot must not contain more than 500 words.

(3) The plot should be either typewritten or legibly penned in ink. Writing to be on only one side of the sheet. No penciled matter considered. Typewriting must be double spaced

(4) Authors who have had stories published already in any magazine, cannot participate in this contest

(5) Prize-winning plots will be given to authors of our selection, who will write the stories, using the plots as a basis and the stories will be published in future issues of WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY. Each story is to be signed jointly by the author who wrote the story and the reader who furnished the plot.

(6) The prizes will be awarded to

(*Continued on Page 431*)

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IN THE MAY ISSUE—

UTOPIA ISLAND

We are more than pleased to present to our readers beginning with the May issue, the complete novel "Utopia Island" by Otto von Hanstein.

This new story is as daring as his others, and in many respects far surpasses them.

The story contains literally dozens of new scientific prophecies which we have never seen in print before and which are sure to be realized in the future. Von Hanstein has even gone into the field of sports and has evolved a number of sports unknown at the present time, all based upon new scientific discoveries.

"THE BEASTS OF HAN-DU-LU"

by Ed Earl Repp. The life forms on a strange world are vividly portrayed in this story filled with action and terrifying suspense. We cannot expect human beings on Venus or Mars. But we can expect life, and intelligent life. What will it be like, and how will it react to us human beings? Mr. Repp tells us.

"TWO WORLDS TO BARTER"

a tremendous story of an ultimatum. "Get out of your world within 48 hours came the word . . . Or else . . . destruction . . ." But they fought back . . . futilely . . . energetically . . . stupidly . . . in this masterly story by J. B. Harris of old England.

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those who furnish the most interesting and the most novel plots; the plots to be judged by their plausibility, originality, dramatic interest, science, etc.

(7) The editors cannot engage in correspondence in connection with this contest and no plot manuscripts will be returned. Those not used will be destroyed.

(8) The publishers reserve the right to award honorable mention to a certain number, not to exceed six plots, which are not money prize winners.

(9) From this prize contest are excepted the employees of the Stellar Publishing Corporation and their families.

(10 Prizes will be paid upon publication of FALL 1931, issue of WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY.

(11) This contest closes at 12 noon May 15, 1931; after which no further entries can be considered.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912.

Of WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY, published 4 times a year at 404 North Wesley Avenue, Mount Morris, Ill., for October 1st, 1930.

State of New York) ss.
County of New York)

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Irving S. Manheimer, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY MAGAZINE, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

Publisher, Stellar Publishing Corp., 404 No. Wesley Avenue, Mount Morris, Ill.

Editor, Hugo Gernsback, 98 Park Place, New York City.

Managing Editor, David Lasser, 98 Park Place, New York City.

Business Manager, Irving S. Manheimer, 98 Park Place, New York City.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.)

Stellar Publishing Corp., 404 North Wesley Avenue, Mount Morris, Ill.; Hugo Gernsback, 98 Park Place, New York City; Sidney Gernsback, 98 Park Place, New York City; D. Manheimer, 98 Park Place, New York City.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.)

None.

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I. S. MANHEIMER. Business Manager.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 16th day of March, 1931.

(Seal) MAURICE COYNE,
Notary Public, Kings County.
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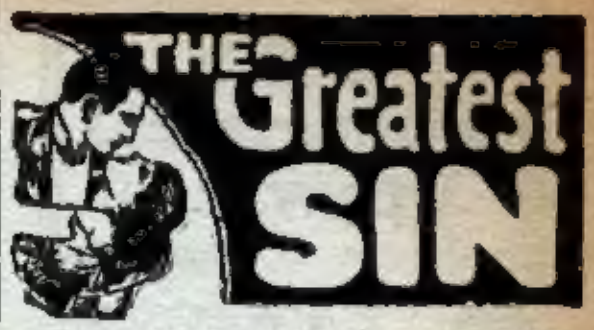
(My commission expires March 30, 1932.)



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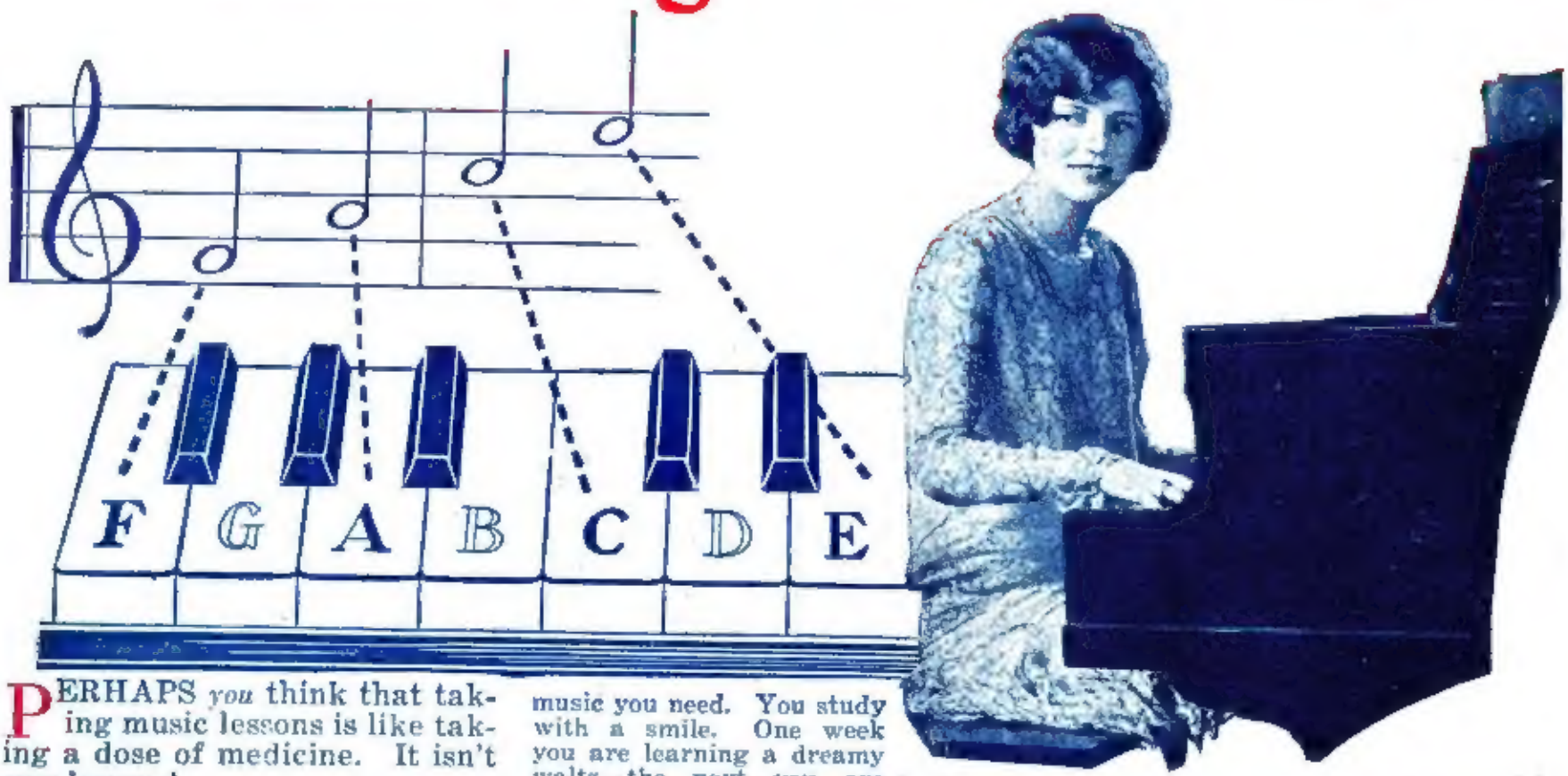

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